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For Faith and Navarre

By
May Wynne

AUTHOR OF

"Henry of Navarre," "Ronald Lindsay" etc.



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For Faith and Navarre

CHAPTER I

MY FATHER TELLS ME HIS GREAT NEWS

August 1st, 1572! The date stands out clear and vivid as I glance back through the long years, sitting with pen in fingers which for so long have but known the sword hilt. Yes! Assuredly if I am to chronicle my life's history that date must be the starting point, for, till then, life had proved quiet and uneventful enough, passed year by year without change, except those wrought by the seasons, at the old Château of Lincourt, situated in the north of Guienne, midway between Périgueux and Angoulême. I was an only child, and motherless, but because I had never known the joys of brotherhood or the love of a mother maybe I missed them less. Though I would stand many a long hour in the great gallery gazing wistfully up at the pictured face of my beautiful fair-haired young mother, and grieving that my father would never

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talk to me of her. But I knew better than to tell him of my longings, gentle and loving though he was to me, relaxing much of that stern rule which in those days kept children more in fear than love of their parents, and allowing me to chatter on to him unrestrainedly of my boyish pleasures, hopes and troubles.

As I look back on those quiet days, I cannot help feeling it must have been a lonely life for a lad of my temperament; for I had no playmates of my own rank, and my father, although he was Comte de Lincourt and owned much property round, lived as simply as any petty seigneur, seeming only to desire retirement and to live unmolested. Of course much of this desire may have been due to the fact that we were Huguenots and the period was one of storm and tempest for those of "the Religion," as we loved to call it. My father was a staunch upholder of his faith, a Huguenot from the heart; not merely one in politics as many were at that time. He was of the stuff whereof martyrs are made, and carried his colours with a high head and noble, lofty courage. No wonder then that as I grew from childhood to boyhood I was graver and more serious than many of my age, though I could be merry and lighthearted enough on occasions, and

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would join eagerly with the village lads at their sports when I was not at my father's side. I loved too, the chase, and was at my happiest when we rode together through the forest which surrounded the château in quest of the wild boar or other game.

There was fishing in the wide moat which surrounded the château. And it was on its banks I was standing, rod in hand, that hot summer's day, half lazily watching the line as it trailed on the water and pondering whether it were too hot to find old Antoine the seneschal to have a bout of sword play with me (a pastime we both enjoyed) when Antoine himself came hastening towards me, down the terrace steps.

"Monsieur le Comte would have speech with you, Monsieur Godfrey," he said, panting a little in his haste, for he was an old man and stout withal, not used to hurrying or bustle.

I threw down my rod at once, wondering more at Antoine's evident perturbation than the message, and sprang lightly up the steps leaving him muttering to himself between short gasps of breath.

My father was sitting at the table in his room when I entered, papers were strewn around, whilst he was leaning with his head on his hand, as if in

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deep thought, and I noted at once that his face was anxious.

He raised his head as I approached and beckoned me to a chair beside him.

"Be seated, lad," he said gently, "I would talk with thee at some length;" and, as I obeyed, he drew me lovingly towards him and passed his hand slowly through my fair curls, gazing sadly into my face.

"The image of thy mother," quoth he softly—and then abruptly—as if fearing the questions that trembled on my lips, "lad, wouldst like to ride to Paris with me?"

I stared amazed, scarce believing my ears, echoing the words in meaningless fashion, whilst a whole tumult of thoughts coursed wildly through my head.

"To Paris!"—that gay wonderful city of which old Antoine in garrulous mood would tell such wondrous tales. Paris! the city of wars and rumours of wars, of secret murders, gaiety, fashion, mirth and intrigue. No wonder that the very word nigh crazed with excitement a simple country boy, brought up in the seclusion of his forest-encircled home, who had not had so much as a glimpse of the great world beyond.

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My father smiled, still sadly, at my great eyes of delight and surprise.

“Aye, to Paris, in time to see the gay doings when the lion and the lamb lie down together, and Huguenot and Catholic are united at last in the knot which ties Henry of Navarre to the fair Marguerite of Valois.”

“And I shall really go to Paris!” I cried rapturously, finding my scattered senses at last. “And I shall see the fine court, and the great folk, and the king—and maybe fight a duel,” I added hopefully, for my head was filled with old Antoine’s tales, and my thirteen years became manhood to my excited eyes.

“Nay, softly, little son, softly!” said my father, laying a restraining hand on my arm, for I had risen in my eagerness to run out and tell Antoine, Pierre, Alaise,—all the château my great news. “There is much I would tell thee and thou must listen attentively for it may be—it may be—” he paused and sighed. “Nay, I will not darken thy bright face with mine own forebodings; the call seems to have come for us to take our journey and join hand to hand in brotherhood and peace with our persecutors. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ our Lord hath said, and Godfrey de Lincourt will

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not withhold his hand because of coward fears. But there! I talk of what thou understandest not. Now listen to me, lad, for it is a great charge I shall give thee, and much more thou must learn ere we set out for Paris. Hast never wondered, child, why we have lived thus quietly, in secret as it were, here at Lincourt these many years?"

"Nay, father," I answered readily, awed by his grave tones and face, "it has all been so happy, and I have never known aught else but Lincourt."

"Nay, that was my purpose," said my father. "Mayhap I have done wrong, but I feared for thee, Godfrey, my only child." He paused, and when he resumed there were tears in his kind blue eyes, which made me draw closer to him and slip my warm young hand in his.

"I, too, was an only son. I, too, lived at Lincourt in my early years, but it was not the quiet life thou hast been used to. My father loved to surround himself with gay friends, whilst I had for companion my cousin Louis de Lincourt. I will not call him friend, for even then he was of a deceitful, envious disposition, and hated me for the sole cause that he was penniless, whilst I was heir of Lincourt. That jealousy grew with the years, and culminated in a duel when we both fell in love

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with the lovely Louise de Mervelles—your mother. I won both her and the fight, and Louis departed from Lincourt never to return, yet vowing vengeance. Later, he married a lady of wealth and rank.

“For ten years your mother and I lived happily, dividing our time between Lincourt and Paris, but she cared not for a gay life, being a devout and earnest Huguenot. It was our great grief that we had no child, more so that we heard Louis openly rejoiced at it, for he was the next heir, and had a son of some eight years of age. And then—after ten years—you were born, but the joy was shattered in its fulfilment for—your mother died——” My father paused again, passing his hand across his face to hide his emotion, then continued :

“For a time I was mad with grief, refusing for a time to see the babe who had cost me so dear, but time heals the first agony of the wounds death leaves, though the scar may be lifelong, and when I returned to Paris after some months, I learnt to my surprise that though my wife’s death was known, all thought that the child who had been born to me had died at its birth, and Louis still looked upon himself as heir presumptive to the title and estates of Lincourt. It was then that the idea occurred to me to encourage this delusion, for I thought, should

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I die leaving thee a helpless babe, Louis, unscrupulous and designing, would not be hindered from removing thee from his path, whereas, if he knew not of thy existence he could not track thee nor do thee harm till thou wert old enough to defend thyself."

"But surely he would find me at Lincourt," I interrupted in astonishment, and then flushed at my rudeness. But my father did not seem to notice, for he smiled.

"Nay, mon fils," he replied, "I had arranged for that too, for—see here—take thou this letter and keep it by thee with care; as thou seest it is addressed to the Sieur de St. Armande at Tarbes. Should aught befall me in Paris flee to him, he will guard and protect thee till thou comest to man's estate, for the sake of the days when he and I were companions-in-arms together and loved each other as friends *can* love sometimes."

"But what should befall thee in Paris?" I cried anxiously, for somehow a cloud seemed to creep into the sunny picture of the future I had conjured up, and the first chill of a dim presentiment clutched its unwelcome fingers at my heart.

"Nay! belike nothing," responded my father, with an effort at lightness; "but there are many

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who wish me ill in Paris, my son, and Louis de Lincourt would rejoice at the chance of seizing thy inheritance, therefore I tell thee all this, young as thou art to understand of such plots and frauds ; and there is something else too thou must guard on our journey, something as thou knowest, most precious of all my possessions. Thou must guard it with thy life ; wilt thou promise ? ”

“ Yes, father,” I whispered, in awestruck tones, as he drew forth a small velvet case, and, opening it displayed a jewel which would have dazzled many a court lady’s eyes and filled her with envy and covetousness. It was composed of emeralds and diamonds joined in the shape of a large crescent, the centre emerald being of enormous size and most lustrous colour, with some inscription in heathen language across it.

“ Thou knowest this, dost thou not, mon fils ? ” said my father, as he looked almost tenderly at the sparkling jewel which flashed with a hundred hues in the sunlight. “ And how it was given many hundred years ago to thy ancestor, by Godfrey de Bouillon for saving his life by his gallant bravery at the battle of Marignac. It was doubtless taken as a spoil from some Saracen ; but it has been guarded ever since as some special token of fortune as well

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as a most precious heirloom. Should evil befall it the house of Lincourt must fall into dishonoured hands, thus runs the legend. So guard it as thou wouldst guard thy life till I ask it of thee again, remembering thou too art Godfrey de Lincourt as the heir has ever been called since those days of the first crusade, and nobly has the name been borne without dishonour; aye! I, Godfrey de Lincourt, say it without pride!"

I gazed wonderingly at my father's flashing eyes and animated face as he spoke, then dropped mine upon the beautiful jewel he held in his hand. Why was I, a mere child of thirteen, to be so entrusted with this precious heirloom? Again that mysterious thrill of coming fears seized my heart. I clung to my father's arm.

"Oh father, father," I cried passionately, "Let us not go to Paris, let us stay here quiet and peacefully, where no one will harm us or hate us, oh say we shall *not* go, father!"

But he shook his head sternly. "A Lincourt—and afraid? Shame on thee, my son," he said quietly—then—as I hung my head, "Listen still further, Godfrey, we go to Paris within the week, but thou wilt ride as my page, not my son, for I would not that Louis discovered my secret yet.

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Neither shall I address thee as Godfrey. Thou shalt take thy other name which he would not know, and be, till we return to Lincourt, if God permit, Raymond de St. Armande. Dost understand? Then that is well. Run out now to thy play, or to the telling of thy news; the jewel and the letter will I guard till we are on our road. Speak to no one of what I have told thee excepting the news of our departure."

And so saying my father turned to his writing and I stole away, my head crammed with a jumble of thoughts, yet half sadly, for the journey to Paris in spite of its joyful anticipations seemed clouded by that haunting presentiment of evil which clung to me in spite of my efforts to be rid of it.

CHAPTER II

THE WARNINGS

The next few days seemed strangely deprived of their usual length; scarce had we risen ere night fell, so busy were we. It was as if all in the château had awakened from long sleep, everywhere was bustle, hasting to and fro, talking, laughter, and no little confusion. The six stout men-at-arms who had been chosen for our escort were elated beyond measure, none the less so in enjoying the chagrin and envy of the less fortunate stay-at-homes. The only person who appeared unmoved and calm amidst the general excitement was my father, who indeed seemed unaccountably sad and distrait, though he would smile as he listened to my gay chatter and imaginings of the great city I was to see for the first time, and answered my thousand and one questions.

For myself, my mood changed as many times as there were hours in the day. Sometimes I was all eagerness to go, and could scarcely restrain my ex-

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citement as I ran hither and thither, plaguing old Antoine to give me practice with my sword play, harassing first one and then the other, or slipping away to my room to don for the fiftieth time my new Court suit of crimson velvet, slashed with gold, and white satin doublet; whilst I figured in front of my mirror as pleased and vain as a young maid. And indeed the clothes became me well, for I was a well set up lad for my years, tall and slim with fair, waving hair, dark eyes and a complexion a Court dame might have coveted.

And yet at other times a depressing chill would steal over me, and I would wander from room to room of the old château with tears stealing unbidden to my eyes, lingering lovingly from spot to spot as if I were bidding them a last farewell, or I would lie me down under my favourite beech tree in the sunny garden and gaze with fond, regretful eyes at the smiling landscape and cool sweet forest glades; and I think at such moments I would willingly have given up my dreams of Paris sights to be allowed to remain as I was, a happy, light-hearted country lad in my quiet home. And my eyes would dilate with that vague, nervous fear as I coned over to myself the strange story my father had sketched so briefly to me.

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This cruel, revengeful kinsman—should we meet him in Paris? Bah! what if we did? had I not my father and our six stout retainers for guards? And none would dare to touch us now that at last Huguenots and Catholics were holding out to each other the right hand of fellowship. And yet,—I shuddered as I remembered some of old Antoine's tales of secret murders and poisonings and the subtle craft of the Italian woman, Catherine of Medici, and how folks said that the death of the good and noble Jeanne D'Albret, which had taken place last month, lay at her door.

But presentiments and fears take no lasting hold on the mind of a boy scarce thirteen years old, though they were deepened momentarily by a fragment of conversation I chanced to hear between my father and the *Sieur de Mauban*.

We had ridden over the day ere our departure to bid him farewell, as was but right and fitting, seeing we were near neighbours and he my father's very dear friend, beside the fact that I had been betrothed to the *Sieur's* daughter and only child, a pretty little maid of some eight summers, with big hazel eyes and curling hair, and a very decided mind to rule me, even from her cradle; a disposition which caused much amusement to her father and

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mine, and to me, no little chagrin, for a boy ever has some lordly contempt for small maids, and I was no exception, though I liked her well enough, and was pleased to see her and tell her my great news.

We were sent out into the garden to make our adieux and to gather some of the great peaches which grew in profusion on the walls, and we sat contentedly enough eating our fruit, side by side on a mossy bank, whilst I condescended to tell Gabrielle a little of what wonders I was going to see, and of my gay clothing and new sword that I was to wear for the first time. She listened eagerly, her big eyes growing ever wider and wider with wonder as I drew splendid pictures of my future doings, even hinting darkly of a possible duel, in honour of some fair lady,—but this my little demoiselle would not allow.

“But *I* am thy lady, Godfrey,” she declared, pouting her red lips and looking up at me with baby coquetry from under her long lashes, “and I will not have thee fight a duel, unless it be for me.”

“For *thee*,” I laughed scornfully. “Bah! thou art but a baby, and no one would fight a duel for thee. And perhaps in Paris I shall see a fair lady,

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and wed her, and never come back to Lincourt at all."

I said this to tease her, though, as I spoke, my heart smote me, for the big tears gathered in her eyes, and she turned her head away with a little sob. Then, as I, repenting, stretched forth my hand to caress her, she slipped down from the bank and ran across the lawn like a flash of light. In a moment I was after her and caught her just under the shadow of the great oak tree, close to the château, of which Monsieur de Mauban was so proud.

"Go away, Godfrey, go away," she cried, wriggling and writhing like a fish in my detaining arms, "thou art rude and—and—ugly and—and I will never love thee again."

"Listen, Gabrielle," I said gravely, for I was not minded to part with my little friend in this fashion, though the quarrel was of her making. "I am going away to Paris to-morrow and may be I shall be killed or poisoned like Jeanne D'Albret, and never come back, and then thou wilt be sorry thou wouldst not kiss and be friends."

She ceased her struggles at this and turned her flushed little face slowly to me. My voice was so solemn that I think she was awed by it.

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"And if I am good and make friends, thou wilt love me always and—and not fight duels and love another lady up there in Paris?" she whispered with womanish persistence, and so I promised, and we sealed the compact there and then under the old oak tree with a kiss, which, though distinctly sticky, by reason of the fruit juice on our faces, was sweet with childish warmth.

"And I have a present for thee," whispered Gabrielle as she drew half shyly, half proudly a small volume from her dress. "It is Clement Marot's Psalter and I have writ thy name in it myself, though it was a weary labour." And my little maid sighed deeply at the remembrance.

I opened the book and there, sure enough, on the fly leaf was written my name in a somewhat shaky childish hand.

"Godfrey Raymond St. Armande de Lincourt. From G. de M. 1572." And below our motto "For faith and honour."

"I will prize it all my life," I said with boyish fervour stooping again to kiss the flushed little face which looked up eagerly to mine, and then hand in hand we walked soberly across the lawn to where our fathers were standing awaiting us.

I was meaning to tell her what I should bring

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back to her from Paris but my thoughts were checked and diverted to another channel at the sound of Monsieur de Mauban's voice,

"And thou wilt not be persuaded, *mon ami*?" he was saying sadly.

I think they did not know we were so near, for they were turned from us, and my father's hand rested on his horse's bridle, whilst his reply to his friend's question was low but firm.

"No, Ernanton, I cannot change my mind, it may be as you say, that there is danger, though I can scarce think that our king could be so false to his own subjects and his honour; besides they say his sister Marguerite is very dear to him. Is not therefore this marriage sufficient proof of his sincerity? At any rate to doubt it might mean the refusing of the right hand of fellowship to our enemies. Our poor country has been torn asunder enough with civil wars, though, God knows, through no fault of ours. But if they now cry peace let us not cry war."

"Aye, aye," responded the more cautious de Mauban, "that is true, and Paris will doubtless throng with Huguenots who, like yourself, have learnt to forgive and forget; but *thou*, Godfrey, why must thou go? Thou hast powerful enemies in

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Paris, Louis, thy kinsman, is high in the favour of the young Duc de Guise since he renounced his faith for advancement. Besides, there is the lad, why take him to share the danger?"

"Ernanton," said my father, and his voice sounded stern, I thought, as I stood there listening with that dim foreboding clamouring anew at my heart, "I ride to Paris because it is my duty. I take the child because I fear to leave him behind me. If ill befalls me in Paris, Louis will lose no time in claiming Lincourt, and the boy must be far from here before he comes."

"But you, Monsieur le Comte, will soon be back from Paris with Godfrey, is it not so?" questioned little Gabrielle, striking into the conversation in her imperious fashion, for having been left like myself, motherless, she had not been kept so strictly as most children of her age, and was in no fear either of her father or mine, who both, if truth be told, somewhat spoil the little maid.

"Ah, Godfrey," said my father, not answering Gabrielle's question, "I have been awaiting thee, for it grows dusk, and we must abed betimes to-night for an early start to-morrow."

"Farewell, Godfrey," whispered Gabrielle, clinging to my neck in a sudden access of regret. "Oh,

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how I wish thou wert not going to Paris. I shall be ah ! so lonely without thee. But thou wilt promise to be back ere the nuts are ripe in the woods, wilt thou not ? ”

“Aye, that will I,” replied I lightly. “And we will go a-nutting together, sweetheart, shall we not ? ”

“God have thee in His keeping, my boy,” said Monsieur de Mauban tenderly, as he embraced me, but there was a sad look in his eyes as we mounted and rode away, smiling and waving our caps till a bend in the road hid the château from view; though I looked back at the last minute for a glimpse of the little white clad figure with the brown, wind-tossed curls and big hazel eyes, filled just now with tears, though the quivering lips struggled bravely to smile as my little sweetheart waved me a last good-bye.

Ah me ! how many a long year was to pass before I saw her again.

Never shall I forget that ride home through the summer twilight of the woods. As I close my eyes I can see even now the tall trees bending over the narrow pathway, rustling and whispering, with the evening breeze playing amidst their leaves, whilst the lingering sunlight made a glory of the sylvan

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glades, and danced amongst the green foliage or kissed the nodding flowers in the distance. Our ears caught the far off challenge of the stag, and the cries of the lesser forest creatures filled the air with murmuring cadences, and beside me my father, tall, erect, handsome, on his favourite grey charger, speaking to me in his grave, kind voice.

Much he said which I scarce understood at the time; dwelling on the past civil wars and troubles between Huguenots and Catholics. He spoke with that wide generosity which always characterized him, not taking credit for all the right on our side and all the wrong on that of our enemies. There were many Huguenots, he told me, whose religion was a hollow farce; who professed the faith simply from a political point of view, for their own advancement, or else because their families were of the reformed faith, rather than from conviction.

"It is such men as these," said my father sadly, "who are but half-hearted partizans in the great cause of truth, and can bring little honour to the faith to which often their lives are a grave reproach and scandal. We must serve from the heart, not the head, if we serve for the cause of God and not our own glory." He sighed as he spoke and would

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have continued had there not come at that moment a startling interruption, for, as we turned down a forest glade, not far from the château, an old woman, bent and shabby, with a face wrinkled and brown like last year's apples, sprang suddenly into the path, so directly before us that my father had to rein back Bayard upon his haunches, while I had much ado in preventing my little Croisette from riding her down.

It was some minutes before the frightened beasts could be pacified, and all the time the old woman, whom I recognised now as one Nanon, a strange, weird creature whom the village boys declared was a witch with an evil eye, and would have on one occasion stoned had I not prevented them, stood leaning on her staff, her bright beady eyes fixed intently on my father.

"How now, dame?" quoth he, when he had soothed Bayard's fears, "what wouldst thou of me? verily thou hast a strange mode of delivering a petition!" And he laughed kindly, for the old woman seemed strangely moved with some violent emotion, which he took for fear at having merited our anger.

For some moments, however, she did not answer, but stood gazing and muttering till I thought that

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her few wandering senses must have left her altogether, but' suddenly she straightened herself up, pointing a thin, wrinkled hand at my father.

"Be warned," she screamed in a voice which reminded me of the harsh cry of a peacock. "Go not to Paris. I see blood, blood, and thou, lying in it, cold and stiff; there will be treachery, murder and blood, see! the sky and the earth and the waters are red with it. Be warned in time, Godfrey de Lincourt. Because thou hast been kind and good, and because I love the fair-haired lad at thy side, I, Nanon, the dreamer of dreams and the seer of visions, warn thee. Go not to Paris, for death lurks hungrily in its streets to embrace thee with her cold arms."

And then, without waiting for a reply, the old hag wheeled round with surprising agility in one who appeared so bent and crippled, and disappeared in the tangle of undergrowth which skirted the forest path. The beads of sweat stood thickly on my forehead and my hand shook with fear, for I had inherited with my southern blood a full share of the superstitions of the time; and I glanced fearfully up into my father's face, hoping to read an altered purpose in it. But though pale there was no trace of fear in the stern, handsome countenance, though he smiled,

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half pityingly, down into mine as I faltered the question,

“Thou wilt go, my father?”

“Aye, Godfrey, that will I,” he replied gently. “What! thou wouldst have thy father turn from his plain duty because of the ravings of an old woman? Fie on thee! and yet—” he added musingly, “’tis passing strange, first thou, then de Mauban, then this woman, with her shrill-voiced forebodings. Son——!” He turned to me with an earnestness which startled me anew. “Two charges have I given thee, and now I give thee a third, perchance the hardest of all: should ill befall me in Paris and mine enemies triumph over me, remember ‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,’ and be not presumptuous enough to take that vengeance into thine own hands.”

We were passing up the slope leading to the château gates as he spoke, and the rays of the setting sun, catching the jewels on his plumed cap, seemed like an aureole above his head. I see him now as I saw him then, erect, handsome, kindly in his dark velvet suit and white ruff; his short wavy brown hair and beard grizzled already with streaks of grey, and his earnest, loving eyes fixed on mine; and, as I gave the promise in a hesitating voice, it

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seemed to me that a sword hung low in the heavens pointing the road to Paris.

I shuddered with the fear of an inward conviction of ill, whilst westward the setting sun sank in a pool of blood.

CHAPTER III

WHAT BEFELL IN PARIS ON ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S EVE

The morrow dawned bright and cheery, the fears of night had been chased away by the rising sun, and behold us with the merry cry of "boot and saddle," *en route* for Paris, with old Antoine, sad and tearful, waving us a last adieu from the château gates.

We halted our little cavalcade on the brow of a rising hill to glance once more on the familiar scene, with its billowy masses of green forest stretching away in the distance and the old, brown château silhouetted against the sky.

Of that long, and I must confess somewhat tedious ride, I have no space to relate; suffice to say that the only incident of moment was my father's sudden illness at Orleans, which considerably delayed our journey and caused me much uneasiness, for was this not yet another omen against our ill-fated journey? However, my father would have none of such talk, and as soon as he could sit upright in the saddle we were on the road again. But the delay

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had thrown out his calculations and the wedding of Marguerite de Valois and Henri de Navarre had been celebrated some four days, when, on Friday, the 22nd of August, we entered Paris by the St. Marcel Gate.

How my eyes turned this way and that in wide surprise as we clattered through the narrow, ill-paved streets whose houses, in many cases of wood, bulged forward as if they would fain have united across the narrow way, whilst the evil odours, and hustling, jostling crowd did not tend to raise my spirits or opinion of the great city to which I had come.

Things, however, seemed better as we approached the neighbourhood of the Louvre, and I gazed with eager, country-bred wonder on the gay costumes and suits of the courtiers and ladies who thronged its gates.

But our destination was not the Louvre, but the Pomme d'or in the Rue Etienne, where the landlord made some ado about receiving so large a company; but when my father displayed his gold, and threatened to seek shelter at another inn, he climbed down from his high horse, and, bowing and scraping, led the way for us to a sufficiently good apartment.

"My page will sleep with me to-night," said my

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father carelessly ; “ for the rest let them have good accommodation, and find stabling for the horses. And now, since we breakfasted early, see that dinner is speedily prepared, mine host, for afterwards I would present myself to his Majesty.”

Mine host bowed, and, with some volubility concerning his own humility, and regard for my father's wishes, he retired, promising that the capon, which was already cooking, should speedily be brought up, which last announcement was much to my satisfaction, for my long ride had made me monstrously hungry in spite of the heat.

My father spoke little at the meal, and when he did he addressed me as “ Raymond,” whilst I was careful to say “ Monsieur le Comte,” and comport myself as it befitted a page of gentle birth, though 'twas more difficult than I had thought it would be, and twice caught myself tripping over the unaccustomed title.

I was all excitement, as may be imagined, on my way to the Louvre, and my evident wonder at all I saw proved a great amusement to the bevy of pages who awaited their masters in the courtyard of the palace. There was no one to tell me the names of the grand ladies and gentlemen who passed continuously, for my father had left me outside with

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the rest of the pages and attendants, but I guessed that the beautiful girl with the dazzling complexion and long, almond-shaped eyes, who passed close to me, surrounded by a group of attendant ladies, was the bride, Marguerite de Navarre; but my attention was soon withdrawn from the laughing young princess to two men who approached slowly, in deep converse. They were evidently of high rank, for the Swiss guard at the gates saluted, and all uncovered as they passed: the one was slight and below medium height, with the pink and white features of a girl and the mincing steps of a fop, whilst his dress of violet velvet was gorgeous with jewels and embroidery. But it was his companion who charmed and riveted my attention, tall, of powerful build, fair, and extraordinarily handsome except for the sword cut, which somewhat marred his beauty, his keen bold eyes seemed to fascinate me, as I caught his glance for a moment ere he passed.

“Who are yon gallants?” I whispered to a page who stood near me idly playing with a little dog. He looked up and stared first at me then at the retreating figures, whilst as he did so he grinned broadly and made answer with much contempt,

“Monsieur le duc d'Anjou, and Henri de Guise.

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Bah! Master Innocence, where dost come from to ask such a question?"

"His nurse's arms most like!" replied another boy laughing insolently, whilst the first lad joined loudly in the jest at my expense. Blows might have ensued, for I was not then versed in court etiquette, and my hot blood was fired by their rudeness, had not I caught sight of my father's broad figure in the distance, approaching with bent head and slow step. I sprang forward to meet him, leaving my tormentors behind, but ere I reached him two courtiers pushed roughly past me, and the elder, advancing, greeted my father by name. I saw him start as he raised his head and coldly returned the stranger's mocking bow, but the latter seemed in no way daunted.

"'Tis long ere we met, mon cousin," he said lightly, but there was a ring of malice in the fair seeming words, which even I, child though I was, could catch. "Welcome to Paris, surely thou art but newly arrived or we had met ere now?"

"I was detained on the road by illness," replied my father shortly, moving forward as he spoke as if he would cut short the conversation.

"Ah! a thousand regrets, may I be allowed to hope that the air of Paris may speedily renew thy

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valuable health?"

My father paused and looked keenly at his interrogator. "From my interview with His Majesty, it seems to me that perhaps the air of Paris is scarce as healthy as you wish it—for Huguenots," he said slowly. "I am minded to seek the purer breezes of Guienne, and that speedily."

"Nay, that surely were needless, seeing how excellently well our poor city seems to suit so many of thy friends," laughed Monsieur de Lincourt, for it was easy to guess that it was he, as to see that his companion, a young man of about twenty-one, could be no other than his son. Both had the same long, narrow faces, cunning, dark eyes, and cruel mouths which were but partly concealed by the pointed red beards affected by both.

I saw father and son exchange glances, as my father, not answering his kinsman's last speech, bowed again coldly, and passed on towards me, whilst if ever there were malice, hatred and treachery in a man's eyes they were in the shifty cruel eyes of Louis de Lincourt at that moment as he bent forward and whispered a few words in his son's ear. Had I but kept a further watch, or guessed why the younger man presently turned back and sauntered slowly after my father, my life's history might have

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been different; but I was all eagerness to ask my father of the great personages I had seen, and Louis de Lincourt and his fox-faced son were of little importance to my eyes then.

But after all, my questions had to wait, since I had forgotten for the moment my new position as Raymond de St. Armande, and had to walk a few paces behind my father all the way back to the Pomme d'or, though I guessed the extra caution was due to the chance meeting in the court of the Louvre.

Neither was my hungering curiosity to be satisfied that night, and in fact my thoughts were speedily diverted, for scarce had we entered our hostelry and sought our chamber, than a visitor was announced, and a grave, middle-aged man in sombre but handsome attire, entered the apartment.

"De Vigney!" cried my father joyfully, rising and stretching forth both hands in welcome. "Thine is the first friendly face methinks I have yet seen since entering Paris!"

The Marquis de Vigney sighed as he flung aside his cloak and sat down.

"Would that thou hadst chosen any time but now for entering it, de Lincourt," he said sadly. "I am the bearer of grave news if thou hast not

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already heard it?"

"Nay," said my father, his face clouding again. "But I know not of what thou wouldst speak."

"The attack on the Admiral," said de Vigney grimly. "He was shot at by an arquebuse in the Rue des Fosses, and though by the providence of God his hand only is injured yet there can be no doubt 'twas his life the man wanted, and men say it was the king himself who ordered the murder."

My father's face grew pale as death, whilst as for me I know I trembled, and old Nanon's ill-omened words rang in my ears.

"Coligny, to be murdered by the king's orders," he murmured slowly, "then woe to all Huguenots in Paris, for if they spare not the tree neither will they have mercy on the branches."

"They say," said de Vigney, "that the king is furious, and has sent Ambroise Paré his own physician to tend the hurt, and yet—my mind mis-gives me. But I cannot stay, the news spreads like wildfire, and I would not that my wife heard it through any lips but mine. Farewell, old friend, and if God spares us, perhaps we shall meet again ere long."

My father did not reply but he grasped the Marquis's hands, and wrung them warmly, and I

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could see there were tears in both men's eyes, yet knew they wept not for themselves at sight of danger.

After the Marquis's departure my father sat long at the table, his face buried in his hands, whilst I crept quietly to his side and tried to nestle my hand in his.

It was long ere he spoke, and when he did it was in a low, strained voice which I scarce knew for his.

"I have done wrong," he said slowly, "wrong to trust in a Valois' honour, wrong, aye, doubly wrong, to bring thee, my child, to this hell, and now it is too late."

"Nay, father," I cried impetuously, "let us order our horses and summons the men and ride home now—quickly," and I jumped up from my seat and clung to him as I had at Lincourt, when I first heard the news of our journey,

But he shook his head. "I must attend the king's levée on the morrow," he said sadly. "I cannot go. But on Monday, God willing, we will ride, little son, and bid a long farewell to this city of treachery and sin."

And so partly comforted I sought my bed, wearied out by my day of excitement, to dream that the Duc de Guise was chasing me with an arquebuse,

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and that Louis de Lincourt looked on and applauded, whilst every time I woke I saw, or dreamed I saw, my father sitting at the table writing or leaning with his face buried in his hands, engaged in prayer.

The next day my father left me at the inn whilst he went to the Louvre; it was weary work indoors with nothing to do, and I wandered to and fro like some caged forest creature, longing to escape from the tedium of my imprisonment and find myself on the homeward way.

The heat and stuffiness oppressed me, and finally I took my stand at the window and found some amusement in watching the hurrying throng. What a medley was there; gay courtiers, fine ladies, men-at-arms, rough, uncleanly folks from the halles and slums of Paris, all pushed and jostled each other in the narrow street below, and the hum of their eager chattering reached me like the angry buzzing of a disturbed hive. But it was not long ere I became aware that in my turn I was being watched by a man in a long cloak, which partly concealed his face, standing opposite the inn in the shadow of a doorway. When, however, he saw that I noticed him, he turned away and passed up the street, and I would have been sworn it was the younger of the

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two men who had addressed my father the day before in the courtyard of the Louvre.

It was towards dusk ere my father returned, and methought his face was brighter than it had been when he set out for the palace. He told me the king, though in a restless and strangely disturbed mood, had received him kindly, and had spoken to all of his great anger at the outrage on the Admiral, threatening all manner of torture by which he hoped to wring a confession from Maurevert, the assassin.

"All may yet be well," added my father hopefully as we sat down together after we had supped, in the deepening twilight of the summer's evening; "and on Monday, God willing, we shall be on the road to the south once more. To-morrow, I hope to take thee to see Madame de Vigney; Monsieur le Marquis holds a meeting in the house for prayer, and there will be a large gathering of old friends of the religion; and now to bed, mon fils—but stay, one moment, thus hast the crescent safely?"

"Aye, father," I answered, not without a sense of proud importance at my charge, "it lies safe within the lining of my doublet, together with the letter thou gavest me to Monsieur de St. Armande of Tarbes."

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"It is well," he said shortly. "Guard them closely, and for safety's sake add these also to thy store till we are safe home again," and he handed me a little packet of papers tied and sealed carefully.

I suppose my wondering eyes had a look of fear in them for he laughed reassuringly. "Nay, little son," he said patting my head gently, "have no fear, but, as thou knowest, there are dark streets in Paris, and a dagger thrust is no uncommon thing in this city. But we shall soon be safe home and then I will speedily relieve thee of thy cares."

And with these words I was fain to creep away to bed, where I soon slept, after the fashion of tired childhood, whatever fears oppress. Ah! little did I guess what my awakening would be.

It seemed as if I had scarce closed my eyes when I heard my father call my name, and I woke with a great start to find him standing over me, dressed, with sword in hand, and a white horror in his face that I had never seen before.

"Dress speedily, for the love of heaven, Godfrey," he cried in a hoarse voice; and then in tones of unspeakable anguish, "My God! we are betrayed!" and as I stumbled, still dazed with sleep and trembling with fear into my clothes, I heard the deep clang-

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ing of a bell from the direction of the Louvre, mingled with the noise of pistol shots and the distant cries of men, "Death to the Huguenots!" "Death to the Huguenots!"

Ah! I heard it plainly now, and my blood froze in my veins at the sound, for the voices, even in the distance, had that ring in them which minded me of a pack of hungry wolves in sight of quarry; then came a shriek, loud and agonising, followed by others, drowned partly in the growing tumult.

"They are in the Rue Béthizy; it is the Admiral whose blood they cry for," muttered my father as he hurried me downstairs. "We may yet escape if we can but reach de Vigney; he has a secret hiding-place where we may be safe till these hell-hounds have wrought their will. Quick, my son, nay, tremble not; the good Lord have us in His keeping, and bring us to a safe refuge."

Downstairs we found the men-at-arms, stretched on the parlour floor for want of better accommodation, four were snoring lustily, and by their flushed faces appeared to have been drinking too lovingly of mine host's good Burgundy; but Pierre and Blaise were already rubbing their eyes, aroused by the hubbub.

They sprang to their feet, as we entered, with

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white scared faces, for the cries outside were plain to hear, and truly they were enough to curdle a brave man's blood.

My father beckoned them silently to follow him, without bestowing so much as a glance at their snoring companions, and we let ourselves out of the door as quietly as might be, and if mine host heard, he remained discreetly invisible, doubtless well content, as he had been paid in advance, and there were our well filled valises upstairs which he might reckon on appropriating when some one else had disposed of their owners.

The night was dark and sultry, and as the inn door closed behind us, we stood a moment looking first this way, then that. It was a long, narrow street, still silent and empty, although the voices of the gathering crowd seemed coming nearer and nearer.

"We must make a *détour* by the Rue d'Averon," said my father. "Quickly, men, and be on guard, for to-night it would seem everyone's hand will be against us, and every sword at our throats."

We hurried along down the street as he spoke, fear adding wings to my feet as I listened to the awful cries that resounded on each side; but scarce had we passed half way the length of the narrow

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road than we heard hurrying footsteps behind us and turning, saw a little party of men—about six in number, as far as I could see in the dim light—in hot pursuit. Escape was impossible, and my father knew it. His one thought seemed to be for my safety. Seizing me by the arm, he pushed me back into a dark doorway, and I heard his voice, trembling with emotion, whisper a blessing, “God keep thee, my son—remember thy charges—for faith and honour. . . Stay where thou art, I command thee.” Then he turned and faced the oncoming band. One of the men carried a lantern which he held aloft, so that the light fell full on my father’s face.

Ah! what a face; white, but calm, unflinching, noble, brave. I choked back a sob as I looked, for I knew what was coming, since the lantern light had gleamed too on its bearer, and I recognized the thin, narrow features and hate-distorted eyes of Louis de Lincourt.

“’Tis he!” he cried, joyfully, “’tis he himself; down with the accursed Huguenot, down with him!”

I saw the gleam of swords in the flickering yellow light, I heard my father’s voice, low and sad, “God forgive thee, Louis de Lincourt.”

I heard the villain’s mocking retort as he aimed

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a blow at my father's breast, for the latter had not attempted to defend himself, and the next moment all was over.

I did not swoon or cry out as I crouched with horror-stricken eyes in the shadow of the doorway. Somehow I seemed turned to stone, frozen to the spot with dumb terror, gazing with fascinated eyes, as after a brief struggle Pierre and Blaise also were struck down and hurled aside into the kennel ; then Louis de Lincourt, handing the lantern to his son, knelt down over the prostrate body of my father. "Bring the lantern nearer, Gaston," I heard him say. "Diable ! he is dead at last—dead at last, mine enemy. Well, it was my turn, and the fates have been kind. Bring the light nearer, Gaston, bend closer. Surely he will have the crescent of Lincourt upon him ; bah ! it has failed this time to bring him fortune."

For a few minutes there was silence, as the two men stooped over their victim, searching for the treasure that was not there. The light gleamed fitfully on their narrow, evil faces, aglow with greed and the lust of revenge, and played in weird flickers on the silvery hair of the dead man, and the dark figures of the men-at-arms, who stood back in the shadows whispering together, and I doubt not

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fretting at the delay, as the sounds of tumult, shrieks, shouts, laughter, and the noise of fire-arms reached us from the neighbouring streets and alleys.

"Death to the Huguenots! Death to the Admiral!" the awful cry rang in my ears, as I crouched back still farther in the shadow, for I knew that I should have short shrift at the blood-stained hands of these midnight murderers did a flash of the lantern light reveal my whereabouts.

Louis de Lincourt, at last satisfied that what he wanted was not there, rose to his feet with a savage oath, spurning the body of his foe, enraged to find that he had been out-witted in spite of all his cunning.

"There is the inn," suggested Gaston. "He fled precipitately, leaving all behind him. The jewel may be there, amongst his valises. There was a page boy, too, who may know somewhat—he seemed of gentle birth—and other men-at-arms."

"Let us go quickly," replied his father eagerly, and swinging about, the party moved away in the direction of the Pomme d'or, and I, a little lad of thirteen, was left with my dead, crouched, horror-stricken, in a doorway, alone and unprotected, in an unknown city on that most awful night.

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I dared not move, though my heart cried out for me to creep towards that still and silent figure lying prone in the narrow path, to wet the cold cheek with my tears, to kiss the silent lips which would never more speak my name, to nestle close to that quiet heart which had ever beat with love to me, but I dared not! A nameless horror had seized me. I could not move, I could not even have screamed if I had willed it. I was paralyzed with fear. At that moment I would have done anything for my life. Aye! I would even have abjured my faith had I been put to the test, and let me not be blamed, for I was but a child, and the sudden awfulness of death was before me for the first time.

But by the grace of God I was *not* put to the test. By some miracle my hiding-place was passed and repassed, and I was left unnoticed, undiscovered, for, though I knew it not, the house in whose doorway I crouched was that of a well-known Catholic leader, and the white cross on its door told passers-by that this was no place for victims or plunder. But of this I was unaware, and oh! the agony of those hours, as the slow dawn crept into the sky on that terrible St. Bartholomew's Day.

Many will tell of the deeds done on that black night with abler pens than mine, for I am on

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fashioner of books, and can do little beyond chronicling mine own adventures for the kindly eyes of those who have asked me to tell of what befell me in those early years ; and others will best relate of how Coligny died, and how Death stalked through the streets of Paris, crying murder with unsatiable lust, not sparing man, woman, or little child, till the very streets ran blood. I cannot even now recall the time without the cold shiver of fear creeping over me, for even in my dark hiding-place I saw deeds done which would have turned the brain of many a strong man, and yet I, a young boy, maintained my reason and senses throughout. Yes ! I watched fascinated, as these human devils thronged the narrow streets, singing, laughing, as they listened to the death-cry of some poor hunted creature. I saw—that was at the beginning of the night, soon after Louis de Lincourt had left his deed of vengeance—a young man, a gallant of the Court, fresh from the Louvre, come hurrying down the street. I saw a band of White Cross murderers meet him. I heard his words of haughty anger, “Gentlemen, I am the Comte de Rochefoucauld ! the friend of the king. You will have to answer to him for this !”

And the laughing answer as a bullet was lodged in his breast : “There is but one answer for

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Huguenots to-night, Monsieur le Comte—by the king's orders—Death!" And I knew what the friendship and honour of a Valois meant.

At last I think I must have swooned, for when I opened my eyes again, the dawn was breaking, the red dawn which seemed to my strained, overwrought senses, more blood, and old Nanon's words came to me, "Blood, blood; in earth and waters and sky—blood everywhere!" Ah! she must have been a seer of visions and a dreamer of true dreams. Would to God we had listened to her warning, I said to myself as, my senses gradually returning, I raised myself and looked round.

The street was empty save for a group of little children who, in mimicry of their elders, were dancing round the body of a helpless infant; and in the grey morning light how weird was the scene upon which I gazed. Bodies of men, women, and children lay stretched out or huddled in shapeless heaps along the narrow street, whilst even yet the savage cries of slaughter reached me from afar. I scarce dared to turn my eyes towards the silent figure beside me, but when I did, I grew cold with horror. The night hawks had been busy on their prey, and the body of my father lay stripped and trampled on in the mire of the bloody kennel, beside

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those of the two poor fellows, Blaise and Pierre. Again wild, unreasoning fear seized me as with delirium. I must fly ere the murderers returned. At any moment the door behind me might open and death stalk out to meet me, for I felt "Huguenot" must be written on every line of my pale face and disordered clothes.

But when I tried to rise, my stiff limbs refused to support me, pains of cramp shot through my legs and arms, and before I had staggered many paces from my shelter, my knees gave under me and I sank to the ground; before I could again rise the noise of approaching footsteps caught my ears, the tramp of armed men. I gave a gasp of terror and closed my eyes. I dared not move to steal back to my lair, my only hope lay in feigning the death I felt sure was coming so near me. But my heart beat like a sledge hammer, and my head whirled with dizzy fear as the footsteps approached. Nearer and nearer they came, silently, with no cries or laughter; tramp, tramp that was all. I guessed there must be a party of three or four from the sound, and I longed to open my eyes and see, but I knew that would be fatal.

They would have passed me soon, I thought, and even with the thought one of the on-comers

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stumbled right across my prostrate body, and with the instinctive feeling of self-preservation I moved and had half risen before I remembered my rôle, and sat staring with eyes of terror and surprise into the masked face of a lady—at least I guessed her to be so though she was heavily cloaked in black from head to foot except where a white cross gleamed on her arm; behind her were two stout men-at-arms—and all stood staring down at me in the same surprise as I displayed.

Suddenly, with the unreasoning abandonment of fear I scrambled to my feet and flung myself before the lady, clutching her black mantle as if for protection.

“Oh, save me, save me!” I sobbed. “They have killed my father and they will kill me too as soon as they find me; for the pity of God, save me, madame!”

“You are a Huguenot?” whispered the masked lady in stifled tones of emotion, and as I nodded in reply, she drew herself up swiftly as if she had formed a sudden resolution.

“I will save you,” she muttered, still in those hoarse tones, “follow me quickly; but wait! it is not safe for you to accompany me without this to-night,” and as she spoke she tore her white hanker-

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chief into strips and pinned them cross-wise on my arm. "The word is 'Guise and Lorraine,'" she said softly, as if she feared the dead around would hear her, and thus we passed hurriedly up the street, I keeping close to my protectress's side and trying not to look around me at the corpse-strewn street.

We paused at length before the small side door of a big house, and the lady stopped to dismiss her attendants ere she entered, bidding them in fierce, imperious tones be silent of her doings on pain of I know not what punishment. The men slunk away like whipped curs, whilst the lady, motioning me to follow, let herself in through the unlocked door, and led me up narrow winding steps and out at last on to a spacious landing.

"I will hide you in my closet for the present," she said softly, and I thought behind the mask that her eyes had a pitying glance in them. "Later I will hear your story. Have no fear, you shall be safe, upon the honour of a d'Estelle, and that," she added with a hard, mirthless little laugh, "is less fragile and more true than that of His Majesty of France."

I did not reply, indeed at that moment fatigue and horror had rendered me almost unconscious of my

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situation. I could but stumble forward at her bidding into the small closet she held open to me, with a few incoherent words of thanks, and fall—rather than lie down—on the pile of rugs inside. After that I remembered no more.

CHAPTER IV

A FRIEND IN NEED

I was awakened at last from my weary sleep of exhaustion by the sound of bells, merry bells that clanged and echoed from every church of Paris. It was the rejoicing of the great city for the murders of St. Bartholomew's Eve, the call to thanksgiving from the King of France because the streets of his capital were drenched in the blood of those who would have been amongst the most faithful and devoted of his subjects if he would have allowed them.

And yet not on the weak and wandering head of Charles IX. be the blame of that night which stains the page of France's history black with shame and dishonour, but on the woman who sat unmoved and calm amidst the hurricane of bloodshed she had herself aroused, with a smile of satisfaction on her mask-like face. Ah! Catherine de Medici, there will be many to cry "guilty" upon you on that Great Day when you stand before the Judgment

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Bar of God. Let that suffice, it is not for us to sum up the sentence on you.

For some time I lay, half dreamily, trying to recall all that had happened. It came back to me slowly but vividly in all its horror, and yet my brain did not reel or snap at the strain—only, *something* had gone out of my life never to come again—that power of light-heartedness and merriment which is the birthright of the young, and the loss of which made me grave and stern even before I came to man's estate. It was as if a red hot iron had been passed over my heart and seared it for ever. And then, as I lay there in madame's closet, gazing up at the ceiling and listening to the bells and the sounds of bloodshed and revelry which came to me ever and anon from the streets beneath, I fell to thinking of Lincourt and old Antoine, of the green forests and of little Gabrielle de Mauban standing as I had seen her with tear-filled eyes and wind-tost curls, waving me her last adieu.

Was it indeed her last? Was I after all to fall a victim to this insatiable monster of Paris who seemed to be awaiting me with open, blood-stained jaws? Should I die perhaps to-day? I shuddered at the thought and fell to wondering what Gabrielle would say when she heard the news. And in the

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midst of my reflections the closet door was softly opened and my preserver stood before me.

She was unmasked this morning, and as she stood there dressed in a loose, white robe she seemed to me like some good angel of deliverance. And yet I was soon to learn that there was not much of the *angel* about Mademoiselle Marie d'Estelles; she beckoned me forth, and I followed obediently into a spacious room. The furniture and hangings were rich, but there was an air of gloom about it which seemed in keeping with Mademoiselle's face as she seated herself on a low fauteuil by the window and bade me approach. I could see as the sunlight streamed in through the window that she was both young and beautiful, with masses of red gold hair which framed against the sunlight seemed like an aureole around her small shapely head. Her skin was of dazzling clearness, and her eyes large and of a most glorious blue. And yet for all her beauty of feature there was a cold hardness in the proud young face, a deep revengeful glow in the lovely eyes which repelled me.

Fortunately she did not seem to notice my involuntary shrinking, but spoke in a clear hard voice, which struck me as being forced and unreal, as if she were repressing by a strong effort a flood of

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overpowering emotion,

"You are a Huguenot," she said, not in inquiry, but as if stating an established fact, "but you are not of Paris, I can see that. Tell me your story and have no fear. I am a Catholic and have power to save you."

Trembling in spite of her reassuring words I told my story, haltingly and brokenly, for I was still unnerved by the horror of it all, whilst unbidden tears gathered in my eyes as I spoke of my fathers' death.

Her cold face softened as I proceeded, and as I finished with a choked sob, she stretched forth her hand to draw me to her side.

"Poor child, poor child!" she said pityingly, "but have no fear, tell me thy name, and thy home. I would do much to save thee."

"My name is Godfrey, Raymond, St. Armande de Lincourt," I made answer, not without a touch of pride. "My father was the Comte de Lincourt of Lincourt in Guienne, not far from Périgueux, and—" but I was checked in my speech by the look on her face, so transformed by hatred that it was more the face of a fiend than a woman, with great eyes of blazing hate.

"A Lincourt! and I saved *thee*!" she cried,

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flinging my hand from her with a sort of loathing. "Ah! the mockery of fate. *A Lincourt!*" I drew back appalled before this blazing rage, so unexpected and to me unaccountable. Suddenly she turned on me again as if a thought struck her.

"A Lincourt and a Huguenot?" she cried, "but how is that?"

"The Lincourts were ever of the Religion," I answered proudly, for my courage was coming back in growing resentment at her contempt, "all but my false cousin, Louis de Lincourt, the slayer of my father."

"The slayer of thy father!" she repeated slowly as if she were trying to realize the meaning of the words. "The slayer of thy father? Ah!" Then, with another quick impulsive movement she drew me towards her again, and her blazing eyes seemed to burn into my soul as she fixed them on me.

"He slew thy father, pauvre petit," she said slowly, in that hard, unnatural voice by which she had first addressed me. "Then thou hatest the false villain even as I? Listen child, and understand if thou canst. *He*, that devil in human form, dared to ask my hand of my father for his son, *his* son! that vile crawling thing, *his son!* I told my father I would sooner die a hundred deaths than

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wed with such an one, that he loved me only for my lands, for I am my father's only child, and heiress, which Gaston de Lincourt knew well, and he was willing enough to pretend a love he was incapable of feeling, for the sake of my broad acres and well filled coffers. My father listened to me. I thought I was safe, but no! the fox could not snare his prey by fair means; he must use foul, to gain his revenge: he soon found out that my heart was given to the young Comte d'Aubois, who was as noble as he was brave and handsome, but he was a Huguenot and my father hesitated to give his only child to such, although I knew in time he would yield to my persuasions, for he can deny me nothing, but Louis and Gaston de Lincourt laid their evil heads together and waited. Twice Ernanton escaped the assassins' dagger, twice the plotters must have gnashed their teeth in disappointed rage. But fate was cruel. Last night's butchery was planned, not by the king but by the queen-mother and the Guises. I heard of it through the warning of one of Catherine's ladies and started late last night, as soon as I knew, to tell my lover, but I was too late. I found him, it is true, but gasping his life away, wounded to death. He could but whisper a few words of love and then

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death came, but ere he went I learnt the name which I will curse to my dying day, the name of his murderer, Gaston de Lincourt ! ”

The passion of her voice vibrated through me, as having finished she sank back in her seat, her face buried in her hands. Yet here was no woman to weep and mourn in despair, but a woman to revenge. I shuddered again as she uncovered her face and bent towards me.

“Gaston de Lincourt,” she whispered softly. “Yes ! that is the name graven on my heart, which I cannot wipe out except by blood. The Holy Virgin grant he may not perish till I can plunge this dagger in his breast, and he dies learning from my lips what is the vengeance of Marie d’Estelles.”

And her face was the face of a beautiful fiend.

I could not help recalling the day on which we rode amongst the leafy woods homewards to Lincourt. Again I seemed to see my father’s face, brave, noble, and pure, and hear his voice repeating in soft tones, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.” And as I thought my heart seemed to choke as I remembered that I should never hear that loving voice again. And yet his murderer lived. It was a hard lesson to learn. Could I leave him to God’s vengeance ? I looked into Marie

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d'Estelles' flashing eyes and my heart cried out with hers in revenge for the innocent blood, but my father's voice rang still in my ears, and I dropped my eyes with an inward prayer for help.

When I looked up again Mademoiselle was speaking more calmly and the look of passion had died from her face, leaving it cold and hard as the grey rocks when the sunlight has faded from them.

"You are weary still, poor child, and white; art hungry? Nay but you must eat or you will be ill, and we start to-morrow for the South. Look not so bewildered, did I not say I would save you? Ah me! you would get but short shrift did you seek the streets of Paris to-day. Harken," and she raised her white hand.

Yes, in the stillness of the room I could plainly hear the roar of the angry mob still seeking its prey. The shrieks of women, the cries of little children, the hoarse shouts of men, and the crack of fire-arms, broken from time to time by the sounds of galloping horses, the mocking catch of a song raised in derision, and the yells of the populace, "A bas les Huguenots. A bas les Huguenots."

"There are 60,000 armed men searching from house to house for victims," continued Mademoiselle d'Estelles calmly. "The king is not minded that

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there shall be one Huguenot left in Paris to rise, white-faced, before him to accuse him of murder and treason, although they say he has commanded that the carnage shall cease, but Henri de Guise laughs at the order; he will not be content till he rides his horse bridle deep through the streets of Paris in Huguenot blood. But pale not, mon enfant, although those cries might well blanch the cheeks of grown men, but here in the Hotel d'Estelles thou art safe, and to-morrow we will ride South, if we can but get clear of the wolves in the streets below. My men-at-arms are lusty fellows, and the Sieur d'Estelles is well known for a good and zealous Catholic. Thou shalt ride as my page, Raymond de St. Armande, for I go South to join my father at Auch, and from thence it is a safe journey for thee to Tarbes, at least it will be far from the clutches of thy kinsmen, who will doubtless lose no time in seeking Lincourt and learning of thy existence. It is fortunate they will think thee dead, for few indeed will escape this massacre, though the Duc de Guise is furious that any have eluded his myrmidons."

I had no words to thank Mademoiselle, but I think she understood my faltering, incoherent speech, and, guessing that I must be faint for want

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of food, she rang her bell to summons an attendant into whose charge I was delivered as the new page sent her by a friend to bear her company to the South.

I know not whether Mademoiselle d'Estelles' servants guessed the true state of the case or whether the men-at-arms who had accompanied her on her midnight excursion had learnt the value of a still tongue. Be that as it may I was treated with kindness; but oh! how glad was I when the morrow came, and I rode once more through the streets of Paris in close attendance on Mademoiselle. She had taken the precaution to mask both herself and me, for the streets were still a pandemonium of horror, whilst shrill cries on either hand told us the work of carnage was not yet over. Once we saw a young woman, tearing bare-headed before our horses, the blood streaming from her arm, whilst she clutched a baby to her in frantic despair, and uttered shriek after shriek as a man in steel corselet with the white badge of the Guise in his hat pursued and at length cut her down before our eyes, snatching the baby from her and flinging it brutally upon the ground.

It was awful, but fear kept my senses alive, and I glued my eyes to my horse's ears till we were free

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of the city and galloping onward in a mad haste to be far away from blood-stained Paris—away! away! into the green country—away from the haunting cries that rang in our ears. But alas! never away from the scenes which were stamped in pictures of fire upon my brain on that terrible St. Bartholomew's Eve.

Of that long ride south I have no time to relate; suffice to say it was accomplished in safety, though we had many narrow escapes of being waylaid and robbed by the reckless bands of free-lances who pillaged the country. The king's Edict was a cover for many an act of murder and robbery, not only on the Huguenots, but on the Catholics themselves. We avoided the large towns by making détours, for the massacres of Protestants were being carried on with bloodthirsty zeal by the adherents of Monsieur de Guise. It is estimated that in the provinces some 30,000 of the Religion met their death at this time, whilst the death roll in Paris alone numbered 10,000. The country ran blood, the innocent blood of the faithful, whilst the Protestant countries of Europe looked on aghast, but without raising a finger in their aid. Nay! it was but a few months hence that her most religious and Protestant Majesty of England was exchanging

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rings and contemplating an alliance by marriage with Monsieur himself.

And so as I say, we rode south, and by the providence of God reached Auch in safety. Here I parted from Mademoiselle d'Estelles with many expressions of gratitude. I fear I must have been but a dreary companion on the road, for the shock and horrors I had passed through had gone nearer to unhinge my mind than I supposed; but she seemed to have formed some attachment for me, notwithstanding; perchance, poor lady, my mood matched her own, and she was not contented to allow me to continue my journey till she had put me in the care of a Huguenot party riding to Tarbes. Her last words of farewell to me were characteristic. "Adieu, mon Godfrey, we may not meet again, but Marie d'Estelles will not forget thee, and if thou thinkest thou owest me gratitude for my poor help, remember that though *thou* owest much, yet *my* debt to Gaston de Lincourt is the greater. I charge thee rob me not of my revenge."

I often thought of the words in after years, and recalled the flash in her great blue eyes and the hard, fierce expression of her mouth. *Ah ! l'homme propose, Dieu dispose !* and "vengeance is mine," said One, greater than Marie d'Estelles.

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I arrived in due course at the Château de St. Armande, a stately building on the outskirts of Tarbes, and was greeted with all kindliness by the old Sieur and his wife. I say old, for to me, a little lad of thirteen, they appeared so, but I do not suppose at this time that Monsieur de St. Armande had kept his sixtieth birthday, and his wife, whose gentle motherliness won my heart at once, must have been some years younger.

The news of the great massacre had preceded me, but both listened with an intense horror and indignation as I told my story, and the tears glistened on Monsieur de St. Armande's cheeks as I spoke of my father's death.

"The traitor! the vile traitor!" he cried, striking the table, at which he sat, in his anger. "But though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished; God's judgment shall yet fall on Louis de Lincourt and on his house." It sounded like a prophecy or a curse, and I thought of Mademoiselle and shuddered. The tears gathered again on the old man's cheek as he read my father's letter. And when he had finished he embraced me warmly.

"Thy father did well to entrust thee to me, mon garçon," he said tenderly, "the good God has given

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us no child of our own, but thou shalt be to us as a son, is it not so, Isabeau? Yes, as a son thou shalt be, and in good time thou shalt win back thine inheritance from the ungodly, yea! the wicked shall not go unpunished," and he nodded his head, as if he found special pleasure in the thoughts of Louis de Lincourt's future retribution.

Thus I entered upon my new life, and if love and tenderness could have blotted out the past, surely that love was lavished upon me by Raymond de St. Armande and his wife. But alas! there are some things we cannot forget, and so in spite of all their care I grew up with a shadow resting on my face, where, but for that black night of St. Bartholomew, should have been only the gaiety of youth.

CHAPTER V

FORTUNE FAVOURS ME IN THE WOODS OF LESCAR

How fast the years flew by in that quiet château of Tarbes; as I look back through the years there is a soft and tender remembrance for that peaceful time. I was happy, yes, in spite of the past, for who but a misanthrope could not have been happy with love and sunshine around him, and the song of the birds and the beauty of nature to listen to and revel in. I grew to love my quiet home, and ceased to pine for the green woods of Lincourt as I sat fishing in the Adour, or watching the great snow-clad Pyrenees, which stood around like mighty giants, guarding and shielding us from danger; oh! the daydreams of youth, how sweet they are, what histories did I not weave there by the sparkling stream and in the whispering woods where the sunlight played, dreams where I was paladin of hard fought fights, the rescuer of distressed damsels of dazzling beauty, the hero in all that was strong and brave and noble. How long seemed the time before

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I could gird on my sword and go forth to carve my way to fortune and glory, and yet how brief a space to look back on as I stood one sunny June morning before the château, my hand resting on my bridle rein whilst my heart tugged me first this way then that, now longing to be off, now grieving to bid farewell to those who for the past seven years had been father and mother both to me.

But ah! how I had looked forward to this day, my twentieth birthday, when I was to ride forth to join my hero, King Henry of Navarre, the champion and darling of the Huguenot cause, at his court at Pau. And yet, now the moment had come, there were tears in my eyes as I received a last blessing and farewell embrace from the Sieur de St. Armande and his good wife.

"Fare thee well, Godfrey, my son," said the old man, tenderly, as he stood there on the terrace steps watching me mount my stout little Béarnais steed, "Croisette," so named after the cherished pony of my childhood. "Remember thy motto, 'For faith and honour,' and that thou art Huguenot as well as Comte de Lincourt."

I scarce understood his words at the time, nor I fear paid much heed, for Croisette was fretting at the bit, impatient to be off; there was but time

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to cry a last farewell and wave my plumed hat once more at the window, where madame stood watching me, and I was across the drawbridge and cantering down the straight white road which led to Pau.

'Twas a lovely morning, and my heart felt light in spite of my regrets, for here was I a man at last, although to my chagrin my chin and lip were still as smooth as a girl's, but bah! my beard would grow soon enough, and I was a *man*, independent too, for in spite of Monsieur de St. Armande's entreaties, I had refused to have the escort of a man-at-arms or even a valet, although I had gratefully accepted the well-lined bag of gold pieces he had insisted on my taking; indeed I knew the good old man was sad at heart that I would take no more, for he ever looked on me as a son, but I would not trespass on his generosity, for the pride of the Lincourts ran riot through my veins.

I can smile now with a kindly pity on that hot-headed youth riding gaily through the summer sunshine to Pau, building castles in Spain of most amazing audacity and lilting a merry tune as he went. In the breast of my doublet I carried the crescent of Lincourt, the precious heirloom entrusted to me seven years ago by my father. I would not leave that behind, though Monsieur de

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St. Armande had hinted that perhaps his would be the safer keeping, but I did not listen to this, for should I not be leaving my "luck" behind me? though I gladly entrusted to his care the packet of papers my father had given me on the very night of the Bartholomew, for in them lay all my claims to mine inheritance, being certificates of my birth and my father's marriage, beside other weighty papers concerning Lincourt and the demesne.

The ride to Pau was not long, and I accomplished it within the day, arriving somewhat hot and dusty, but all aglow to lay my sword at my king's feet.

I remember my first glimpse of the quiet, somewhat gloomy little town as I halted at the village of Jurançon to breathe and water my horse; the old brown château standing grim and bare facing me on the opposite slope of hills, whilst between us dashed the noisy little stream Néez. I was resting thus on my horse gazing in front of me, and wondering, boy-fashion, what colours the future would paint for me, when I heard the jingle and noise of horses behind me, and, turning, saw a small cavalcade approaching through the woods. It was easy to see that it was a party fresh from the chase; all were laughing and jesting and seemed in the merry mood of those who had enjoyed good sport.

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It did not need mine host of the wayside inn to whisper in my ears that the foremost figure in the hunting suit of green, and white-plumed hat was Henry himself. I had heard the description of this prince too often from Monsieur de St. Armande to mistake the short but stalwart figure, with its mass of curly black hair, strongly aquiline nose, the curling chin, and piercing grey eyes of the Béarnais.

He was talking with much animation to a lady of great beauty who rode beside him on a superb white jennet, the lady was laughing merrily and I could see her cheek was flushed with pleasure and pride; she glanced carelessly, as she passed, to where I stood with doffed cap and beating heart, and made some whispered remark to the king whose bright eagle eyes turned to me on the instant, only to be removed as quickly as he made answer to the lady.

“St. Michel, indeed! come to reprove us for our frivolity, but who could be solemn before such eyes as yours, mademoiselle? They are as sunshine on the brook which leaps and dances to meet the golden beams.”

I heard no more, for the voices of the foremost riders were lost in the clatter and murmur of the accompanying cavaliers and ladies, and then the gay company, turning a corner in the winding road,

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disappeared from sight, leaving me to follow at my leisure with heart which still beat with excitement though somewhat downcast that Henry had not answered my salute or enquired my name.

Bah ! how foolish are the dreams of youth, and at what high price we rate ourselves ere we have mixed in the great world. At St. Armande I had been looked on as a son of the house and treated with respect and deference ; at Lincourt I had been worshipped and bowed down to as the heir and darling of all. But here, at sombre Pau, I was to begin the disagreeable task of finding my own level, and that that of a young gentleman robbed of his inheritance, with only a moderate supply of gold pieces to line his pockets with, was no high one.

In vain I waited for an audience with the king. I had no one to push my interests, no one I could call friend in the motley throng of courtiers that day by day crowded the antechamber, and who stared at me, the women with curiosity, the men with indifference or contempt. I was shy, out of place amongst them, the very cut of my grey velvet mantle which I had admired so at Tarbes, seemed here old-fashioned, and I felt keenly that my smooth cheeks and clear complexion gave me an appearance of extreme youth. I had resumed my rightful title as

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Comte de Lincourt, for I had no fear of meeting my kinsman here in the court of Henry of Navarre, but it sat ill upon me in my present position, and I half regretted that I had not passed as Raymond de St. Armande.

And so the weary days went by, and my golden dreams were fading fast, till at last, the very day that was to see the turning point of my fortunes, I seemed at the lowest ebb of misery.

The court was about to move to Nérac; greatly to the satisfaction of all the courtiers and grand dames, who complained bitterly of the ennui of Pau; there was talk, too, of the queen mother, Catherine de Medici and her bevy of fair maids of honour paying her son-in-law a visit in the near future. I had thought to have heard bitter revilings of this evil and plotting woman who had doubtless planned the massacre of St. Bartholomew; but nay! the talk was of the additional gaiety her presence would bring, of balls and masques and pageants, till, sick and sore at heart, I turned on my heel and sought my lodgings, my mind in a turmoil.

What was I to do? Go to Nérac? If not, my hopes of serving Henry of Navarre were dead, there only remained the alternative of returning to St. Armande like a whipped cur, and that I would never

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do. I would go to Nérac and wait. Perhaps the time would come when the king would find time amidst his pleasures for listening to the petition of a loyal subject. But I sighed, even whilst I thus resolved, for I knew the well-filled bag of gold pieces was getting woefully lean, and my wardrobe would not permit me to ruffle it with the young sparks who would doubtless come in the train of Catherine. Nay! I knew even now that the grey velvet suit with its slashings of pink satin, of which I had been so proud, was soiled and old-fashioned, the doublet was not of the latest mode, the cloak too long, yet I had not the wherewithal to purchase another, and too proud to ask for what would have been so readily given by Monsieur de St. Armande.

You may imagine I was in no joyful mood as I wandered forth that day, too sick at heart to repair to the château on the chance of an audience with the king, yet unwilling to remain in lodgings which were far from commodious.

As chance would have it, I took the road towards Lescar, and if my mood had been less heavy I should have enjoyed the beauty of the scenes I passed, the woods of shady oaks through which the sunshine played in broken beams of flickering glory, the myriads of flowers starring the ground and scenting

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the warm summer air, the songs of the birds and cooing of the pigeons above me. But just then I was not conscious of all this loveliness, only the dull and dreary side of life seemed uppermost around me, I could see but the dead leaves of past sad winters, could hear only the death cry of the songster as a vagrant hawk pounced upon it, or the piteous croak of the frog as the heron claimed its prey.

It is ever so with youth; he has not learned to trace the passing shadows; all must be sunshine or utter gloom with him, and as I tramped sullenly enough through the oak woods to Lescar that June day all was gloom. My pride revolted against the thought that I was but a hanger-on—a nobody at court, *I*, who had dreamt such dreams of my reception here. I, who had seen myself in fancy admired and sought after by all. What foolishness it was.

And the court itself? How different to what I had pictured it in the quiet château at Tarbes. I had heard little of the scandals and intrigues which were linked with my hero's name, and this is scarce so wonderful as it appears, for the court seldom came to Pau, Henry preferring the brighter town of Nérac, or even Montauban, to his birth-place, which reminded him too vividly of his murdered mother.

And so all had come upon me with the shock of

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surprise, for here, where the hope and leader of the Huguenots held his court, the religion on which he based all his claims for support seemed to have little place. Earnestness, holiness, strength of purpose, would have been laughed to scorn by the idle, frivolous crowd of men and women who thronged around Henry of Navarre. Immorality, intrigue, and lightness reigned supreme, and a beautiful woman, whatever her character, was placed far higher in the king's favour than the noblest, most faithful follower who dared to look askance at the doings of the court.

And so, leaping to the other extreme, I declared to myself that all was vanity and sin, and felt myself a martyr, suffering scorn for virtue's sake, a view somewhat far of the mark, since I had been but a wide-eyed spectator of the scenes around me.

And thus I wandered on, with bent head and a heart full of railing against king, court, and my own ill-fortunes, aye! even against the *king*, for my hero had fallen from the shrine at which I had worshipped from my boyhood, and love had not yet come to set him up, not so high perhaps, but nearer my heart.

It was a wonder that I did not lose my way

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amidst the woods, for I heeded little where I went ; but by good fortune I kept the right direction and came at last to the little town of Lescar, a quaint place, old-fashioned, and old-world too, as it nestled there amidst its woods and streams. The cathedral, which dated back to the days of the second Philip, was being enlarged, but the work was suspended, the day being one of fête, and none noticed me as I lingered in the cool shadows of the building, resting after my walk and noting the stone carved effigy of one Adelbert de Vézy, whose Latin inscription told how he had fought and fallen in the first Crusade. I felt some kinship to the silent figure lying there with closed and mailed hands, as I let my fingers rest inside my doublet on the case which contained the crescent won by the first Comte de Lincourt, and as I recalled the legend I was comforted ; so far I had kept it safely from dishonoured hands, and surely the good fortune it brought to its owner would not fail me now ?

Cheered, in spite of my many cares, I turned away to find to my surprise that the shadows were already lengthening, and that twilight had stolen a march on me unawares.

I quickened my pace, for the road to Pau was a lonely one, and the oak trees afforded excellent cover

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for the many marauders who infested the woods. Instinctively, I grasped my sword hilt as I entered them, for here the shade seemed almost to deepen into the gloom of night, and I blamed myself, as a young fool, for having wandered so far and so late.

For some way, however, I walked on unmolested, hearing nothing but the sound of my own footsteps tramping through the dead leaves, or occasionally the snap of a dried twig, and I was beginning to congratulate myself on all being well, when, not twenty paces ahead of me, I heard a sudden sharp exclamation, hardly so much of fear as of annoyance and surprise, followed immediately by the clash of steel.

A bend in the road hid the belligerents from me, but drawing my sword I rushed forward, and there, in a small clearing of the wood, stood a man, a gentleman, as I could see, by his dress of rich violet velvet, defending himself most gallantly against three masked ruffians.

In the space of a few seconds I was beside him, and though he was too hard pressed to speak I caught a quick nod of thanks as I received one of the foot-pads at the point of my sword and he dropped badly wounded.

It was the first time I had struck at a man to kill

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him, and as my blade felt the soft resistance of his flesh my heart turned sick. But this was no time for squeamishness, since my companion was breathing heavily, as if exhausted, so, with a mighty effort I drew out the blood-stained point of my sword and most opportunely struck up the blade of a second villain who would have stabbed the unknown cavalier in the back just as he had succeeded in running his assailant through, spitting him for all the world like a fowl, so that the man died as he stood. It was well for the stranger, however, that I was there, for he would speedily have joined his adversary had I not engaged with the third fellow whilst he withdrew his blade with some difficulty from the body; but I was unnerved, and should speedily have been cut down had not mine antagonist seen his would-be victim turn on him with his blood-stained sword, when, having no stomach for facing the odds, he turned with a howl and fled through the gloomy woods.

The cavalier, to whose rescue I had come, stood for a few moments resting on his sword, breathing heavily and looking down at the bodies on the ground. Presently he turned his face towards me, and the moment his keen eyes met mine I knew him, with a sudden uplifting of my heart, for the

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Baron de Rosny, the king's most trusted and valued counsellor and friend.

He smiled as he read recognition in my eyes, and bowed with courtly grace.

"Monsieur knows me, I see?" he said interrogatively. "And so has me at an advantage. I am not so fortunate."

"My name is Godfrey, Comte de Lincourt," I answered, reddening as I spoke, for my heart seemed drumming in my ears with excitement.

Again he bowed and smiled very graciously.

"Then it is to Monsieur the Comte de Lincourt that I owe my life. I hope I shall not prove ungrateful; but now for the present I fear even gratitude must wait whilst we hasten homewards, for having allowed one of these *croque morts* to escape we shall doubtless have the whole pack upon us shortly, and Fortune, being but a fickle jade at best, may not a second time prove our friend; besides, the night is abominable for sword play."

He spoke coolly enough, wiping his blood-stained sword the while and returning it to its scabbard, but as I would have passed on he stayed me with a movement of his hand. "Nay," he said lightly, "it were well, ere we proceed, to trace whose hand

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struck the blow," and, stooping, he pushed back the mask from the face of the man he had spitted. In the fading light it was difficult to make out the features at a distance, but as far as I could judge, they were those of a young and handsome man, no *croque mort* or foot-pad I should have thought, but a gentleman, though how such an one could have stooped to assassination I could not fathom. De Rosny seemed to know the face, for his brow darkened as he bent even lower, carefully wiping the blood which oozed from the dead man's lips, as if he would make no mistake in his identity; as he did so, my man stirred slightly and a groan of pain broke from him.

De Rosny immediately rose and turned towards him. The fellow was lying face downwards but it was easy work to lift him up and remove the mask. He was breathing heavily and opened his eyes as we moved him, with something between an oath and a cry of pain. Seldom have I seen so unprepossessing a countenance, with a short, bull throat and stubby red beard, small black eyes set obliquely in his head, and the purple scar of a wound which must have bidden fair to split his nose in twain. It was evident he was no gentleman, but simply a man-at-arms or some villainous *croque mort* hired

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for the occasion.

De Rosny gripped his shoulder and bent his own head down to a level with the wounded man's, as he said distinctly, but in low tones, "It was the queen-mother's bidding, was it not, *mon ami*? What was the price?"

"Twenty crowns a-piece," muttered the man with another oath and a wild look around; he was still stunned and half wandering from the pain of his wound, for I had caught him very fairly between the ribs.

"Twenty crowns a-piece," he said again. "Morbleu! and to think we have bungled it, whilst I am like to get mine own death into the bargain, all for the sake of a rat of a Huguenot." And with these words spoken in a kind of gasping fury, he rolled over as if he were indeed dead, whilst de Rosny, paying no further heed to him, rejoined me, and together we walked onwards at a rapid pace.

It was evident that in two senses of the word we were not out of the wood yet, for behind us we could hear the snapping of twigs as if several persons were pushing their way through the undergrowth which lined the road, but the noise was still some distance off and we were now almost running, when suddenly de Rosny halted, seizing my arm,

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and I noticed that we had come to a spot where two roads branched off from our own track, one taking a higher, the other a lower level. "Quick, Monsieur," whispered my companion, "they are too many for us, hide yourself," and he half dragged me to where a great clump of yew trees and undergrowth bordered the path. We had scarcely ensconced ourselves behind this shelter than we heard the sound of many footsteps running along the road; and, peering out, could discern a band of masked men, about six in number, all with drawn swords in their hands. Instinctively I clutched at mine as he who seemed captain amongst them called a halt, in quick, imperious tones.

"Which road will the dogs have taken?" he cried angrily. "Morableu! if we fail after all, I shall never dare face Catherine again. Quick, fools! which is the road to Pau?"

"The lower is the quicker, Monsieur le capitaine," gasped one of the men, he who had but a few minutes previously nearly terminated my career.

"Then forward!" shouted the captain. "*Nom d'un chien*, thirty crowns to the man who spits me the accursed heretic."

And the next moment the little band were hurrying onwards, whilst, stepping from our shelter we

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listened till the sound of their feet died away in the distance. De Rosny smiled grimly, then, turning, bowed to me.

“And now, Monsieur,” he said lightly, pointing to the upper road, “*En avant.*”

CHAPTER VI

I ENTER THE SERVICE OF HENRY OF NAVARRE

The danger passed, de Rosny proved himself not unmindful of his debt of gratitude, and with a few kind questions soon drew from me my simple story. It did not take long in the telling, and this I could see pleased him, for he was a man of few words himself and valued shortness of speech in others. He smiled kindly when I had finished, but did not speak, and I, though my heart was beating wildly between hopes and fears, did not dare press my petition. When he spoke my heart, I confess, died within me, for seemingly he had forgotten my affairs altogether, alluding merely to the darkness of the night.

"The wolves will howl in vain for their prey," he said, with some quiet mirth in his tones, "and Monsieur le capitaine will have to face his royal mistress without the welcome news of my death! Ah, well, it was a bold stroke and well nigh a successful one, but for the providence of God and your

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stout arm, my friend, and now I must e'en lay myself under a further obligation by craving your silence on the affair."

I bowed, somewhat stiffly I fear, for I had none of the polish of the court, and was chagrined at my failure to win a promise from him of advancement in the king's favour.

"It is not my habit to talk, Monsieur le Baron," I remarked, with what I hoped was a grand air, and he smiled at my words as if he found some amusement in them.

By this time we had left the unfriendly shelter of the trees and were approaching Pau. My companion halted as we neared the château and stretched forth his hand in a most friendly fashion.

"My heartiest thanks, Monsieur le Comte," he said warmly, "and if the friendship of Maximilien de Béthune is of any value, be assured that it is yours, and—" he added, as if it were an after-thought, though there was a smile about his lips as he spoke, "if you will present yourself to-morrow morning at the château, about the hour of eleven, I will arrange that you may lay your petition of service before his majesty himself." Then, without waiting for the torrent of thanks I would have poured upon him, the great man disappeared, leav-

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ing me to retrace my steps to my lodging, a very different Godfrey de Lincourt to him who had stridden so moodily through the woods to Lescar that very noon, and methinks I could e'en have found a blessing for Queen Catherine herself for having plotted to remove Monsieur de Rosny from her path at a moment so auspicious to myself.

You may imagine if I rose early the next morning. *Ma foi !* I was out of bed, brushing my velvet suit and polishing anew my long riding boots ere the serving wench of the hostelry had crept down in the grey morning light to her work. Ah ! but it was a great day that. My heart beat high with hope as I stood before my mirror adjusting and re-adjusting the set of my doublet, my cloak, or my plumed cap, not, I confess, without some little pride at my appearance, and, as an old man, I can say without vanity that I had somewhat to be proud of, for I was a fine lad for my years, though I should have scorned the title then, for at twenty, one feels oneself a man grown indeed ! My height was some three inches above six feet, though the slightness of my figure made me seem less ; my short hair was bright and wavy, my complexion (ah ! 'twas a sore point in those days), had the peach bloom of a girl's, but my blue eyes

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had a glint in them which perhaps was over hard and stern in one so young ; my mouth too was strong and had not caught the trick of smiling or laughter. All this I saw as I gazed anxiously in the mirror that bright summer's morning, though I think my clothes gave me more concern and anxiety than my face ; but the crescent of Lincourt sparkled as clasp to my cloak, and I knew the great and brilliant gems would attract more attention than the errors in the cut of my doublet.

How I strode down the creaking stairs of the inn, how my heart beat as I passed down the narrow streets, elbowing my way with much masterfulness through the crowd of market women who thronged the path, chattering and haggling together for all the world like a flock of geese let out in a green meadow.

It was on the stroke of eleven that I presented myself at the château gates, to the surprise of the guard, for the king's hour of audience was not till midday, and I was like to have been turned back had not the Baron de Rosny himself appeared.

"The king walks on the terrace," he said resting his hand on my shoulder in kindly familiarity, 'and will give you audience at once, Monsieur le Comte."

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I scarcely heard his words, so furiously was my heart beating, and seeing my agitation he spoke no more but led me towards the terrace, where, seated on the low battlement which ran round the walk, overlooking the town and the wooded slopes of the hills opposite, was the king, in animated converse with the young lady who had accompanied him to the chase on my first day's encounter at the village of Jurançon, and whose name I afterwards heard was Mademoiselle de Rébours. It was she who spied me first and clapped her hands with a little peal of silvery laughter.

"Why, Sire!" I heard her exclaim. "It is St. Michel of the chase himself!"

The king turned, smiling, towards me. "St. Michel in very sooth," he said, adding *sotto voce* as I stooped to kiss the hand he graciously extended, "and, *ma foi!* fresh from the slaying of the dragon,—and now, mignonne, thy pigeons are cooing for their morning meal: is it not their privilege to be fed by the hand of the fairest maid in France?"

Mademoiselle de Rébours pouted her red lips rebelliously, but she knew better than to ignore the hint to withdraw, so with a deep curtsy to the king and a challenging look of raillery in my direc-

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tion she flitted away, the king sitting watching her dainty figure till it was out of sight with an amused smile on his lips. But when the flutter of her blue robe had disappeared he turned again towards me and I could feel, as I stood with downcast eyes, that his keen look was taking me in from head to foot; then, as I looked up, he smiled with that fascination he could so well command, and again extended his royal hand.

"*Ventre saint gris*, man," he said with much warmth, "Monsieur de Rosny here has been telling me of the debt not only I but all France owe you in your timely assistance last night. Ask what you will as guerdon and if it is in the power of Henry of Navarre to grant, you shall have it, on my oath you shall!"

I bowed low, whilst the tears gathered in my eyes at his kindly words. "I would ask to serve your Majesty," I made answer, "both now and ever."

"Nay, that is but to put me under further obligation," he replied, "my courtiers are not wont to be so backward in their requests."

"It is the only favour I ask, Sire," I made answer, for already I had fallen under the fascination of his personality, and the warm worship of my youth

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seemed to course once more through my veins.

"Well, well," he laughed, "be it so! Monsieur de Rosny will see that you are appointed as ensign in one of my regiments at Nérac, where the Court goes in three days' time, and you shall have your company, I promise you, as soon as you can command it. Nay! no thanks!" as I stammered forth my incoherent gratitude. "You have made Henry of Navarre your debtor for life," and he rested his arm affectionately on de Rosny's, "but of that the less said the better. I shall know how to repay those who would have robbed me of my best friend when the time comes; for the rest—a silent tongue, Monsieur le Comte, is golden."

I bowed and would have withdrawn, had not the king retained me with something of a twinkle in his eyes.

"I shall see you at court often, monsieur," he said, with an air of command rather than enquiry. "That face and figure will make the hearts of the ladies soft and kind towards you if I mistake not. But why so grave, man? St. Michel himself could not have looked more sober when he faced the dragon!"

I did not smile in answer to the king's challenge. "Sire," I made answer, and I warrant my face grew

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stern enough to justify his words. "I forgot the art of laughing the night of the Bartholomew, and I have never learnt it since."

Henry's smiling face sobered at once, indeed at any time in his life he could never recall that dread night without a shudder.

"You were in Paris?" he interrogated.

"Yes."

"Ah!"

There was silence for a few minutes, then the king spoke again.

"Blood for blood, and murder for murder. Well! the Duc de Guise and Queen Catherine between them have a heavy reckoning to pay. I blame not poor Charles; his was neither the head nor heart to plan such devilry. I shall never forget him, Messieurs, seven nights after the massacre. All day he had been wretched and depressed at the omen, as he called it, of the descent of hundreds of ravens on the Louvre, but at night he was mad with horror, declaring he heard the palace ring with the death cries of his victims. I would not have been King of France with that massacre on my soul for twenty crowns."

I shuddered, the memory of that night was awful to me, but the mood of the king changed quickly.

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"*Ventre saint gris*, my friends," he exclaimed with a laugh, "the very name of St. Bartholomew gives me ennui, and ennui is the worst of companions. Fear not, Monsieur le Comte, I would wager a kingdom that ere you have gained your company you will have learnt to smile, if laughing eyes and fair faces can teach a man."

And with that he rose and walked slowly down the terrace, leaning on de Rosny's arm, towards the spot where Mademoiselle de Rébours stood in a charming attitude, white pigeons encircling the air around her or resting upon her dainty shoulders. She was indeed a lovely enough maid, but the sight of her did not quicken my pulses as I strode away, my head full of plans, ambitions and hopes.

Fortune was a fickle jade, as de Rosny had truly said; having persistently turned her back upon me, in spite of all my wooing, woman-like, when I had given her up and resigned myself to my fate, she well-nigh overwhelmed me with benefits.

Scarce had I reached my hostelry than I saw standing at the door several men-at-arms in the St. Armande livery, and entering was told by mine host, with far more obsequiousness than he had shown me of late, since my pockets grew light, that Monsieur de St. Armande awaited me in my chamber.

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I hastened upstairs with a greater eagerness than I should have shown if his coming had been timed two days earlier, and was speedily in my good old friend's embrace.

"I came to bid thee God-speed, Godfrey," he said, as we drew our chairs to the table, and I had called to mine host to bring us a bottle of his best d'Arbois, "for the news reached us that the court leaves for Nérac next week, and Dame Isabeau and I were anxious to hear how things went with thee."

In some elation I told him my story, leaving out, with much regret, the affair in the woods of Lescar, mentioning lightly that I had earned the obligation of Monsieur de Rosny.

"A good and noble gentleman," said Monsieur St. Armande warmly. "Thou hast done well indeed, Godfrey, to earn his friendship. And now, mon garçon, that you are indeed in the king's service, you will need more money. See, I have brought it with me. Nay," as I made a gesture of refusal, "pâin me not by rejecting my gift, remember we have no chick or child of our own. When Death calls for me the lands of St. Armande pass to a stranger, thou art all we have to love; the debt is on our side in that thou hast been as a loving and dutiful son to us these seven years past, and whilst the

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enemy steals thine inheritance from thee, thou must not refuse to accept what is our privilege to give."

With tears of gratitude I embraced the old man who had been indeed as a father to me, and with many messages of love and respect to the good Dame Isabeau I watched him mount and ride away; then with a heart lighter than it had been for many a week I turned to my chamber. Truly the sun had shone upon me that day!

The next few days were busy with the bustle and preparation of departure. You may imagine to yourself what days of excitement and joy they were to me. No longer was I an alien and an outcast amongst the throng of gay courtiers; men began to whisper that Monsieur de Rosny, the king's counsellor and chamberlain, was my friend; the women to look on me with interest and approval. The grey velvet suit which had caused me such uneasiness was discarded for one whose cut and fashion were irreproachable. It was a transformation; I was indeed Monsieur de Comte de Lincourt!

And so the days passed till we rode, a small but brilliant cavalcade, away from Pau, with its snow-capped mountains and vine-clad hills, whispering

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woods and mysterious air of gloom, to Nérac, with its wide meadows and streams, and avenues of cypresses and willow. And at Nérac life opened to me a fresh chapter.

I look back to those years now with some wonder at myself.

Two years in which I grew from youth to manhood; years of mysterious moulding powers, with lights and shadows intermingled. I became no courtier, never could I bring myself to join with the young beaux who minced and strutted, preening themselves in their mistress's smiles, discussing with absorbed interest the newest cut of a cloak, the colour of a doublet or the shape of a ruff. It sickened me to hear them and see them too with their painted faces and scented beards in imitation of the women-men of the King of France. Neither did I fulfil our Henry's prophecy and fall a victim to the charms of a court lady, though my indifference stung them into many a device to entrap my heart; but soft eyes and witching glances had no fascination for me in those days; perhaps the dim memory of two innocent, childish eyes and a wind-tossed head of sunny curls came between me and their arts, but more like that my heart at the time was laid at the feet of him who had the rare gift of

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fascinating men as well as women, and drawing all hearts with whom he came in contact to work his will.

Ah ! Henry of Navarre, the hero of my boyhood, the worship of my manhood, what powers ! what a will was his ! the indomitable will which made a naturally physical coward into the hero of every field and drew admiration even from his enemies ; the fascination which blinded his friends to the glaring faults of his private life and made them love him through all.

And yet I cannot help sadly agreeing with the words Monsieur de Vinois spoke to me, as in 1594 we rode triumphantly behind our hero through the streets of Paris, that if Henry of Navarre had been of the Religion in heart as well as politics the Reformed Faith might in time have become the Faith of France, and the reign of the great Henri Quatre been unsullied with any stain of dishonour, such as in the mind of all Huguenots was given to his name on that 25th of July, 1593, when he adjured the Religion in which those who had won him the throne had fought and died. But who are we to condemn ? Let us forget the failures of a great and noble man and remember only the virtues of one who was ever a gallant and generous gentleman.

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I have said that with all my devotion to the king, I was no courtier, and yet I was not without my friends; the presence of the court at Nérac drew thither many of the noblest and most whole-hearted in the cause, and more than one I met who gladly held out to me the right hand of friendship for my father's sake. The Baron de Rosny too was not forgetful of me, and it was not long before I was given my promised company. We were not idle either, for although the treaty of Bérgerac still found Huguenot and Catholic outwardly at peace, Henry kept his camp and could sally out from time to time to win at the point of the sword some of the towns which in virtue of his marriage belonged to him as dowry of Marguerite de Valois.

Those were good days when the bugles rang the call to arms and we galloped off in the dead of night to surprise some sleepy town or win our way by subtle strategy. My blood runs cold and slow in my old veins now, but it trickles even yet into warmth as I think of those times and the great street fight at Cahors, when by good fortune I won the thanks and friendship of the great M. de Morney himself whom I saved from an awkward thrust from some coward pikeman as he lay beneath his horse with broken leg. Aha! we made Monsieur

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de Vezin, the governor of the town open his eyes indeed, for men were slow in those days to realize that the little Béarnais, as they called our king, was a power to be reckoned with, and that there lay more beneath those raven locks than mere thoughts of the chase and gallantries.

But the time had not yet come when France was to know one of her greatest and noblest sons as he was, and Henry bided his time in seeming indifference.

As for me, you must not think that during these years whilst the pink and white of my complexion was changing to the bronzed vigour of manhood I had forgotten that I was in truth Comte de Lincourt, heir to a very noble inheritance which had been fraudulently stolen from me by one whom I had the strongest reasons to hate. No! Lincourt was often in my thoughts, and though in those days I thought little of women, still I confess that I caught myself wondering from time to time what the little Gabrielle de Mauban had grown like, and I would smile to myself, with a tender sadness as I looked at the worn volume of Marot's Psalms which I had kept by me through all the years, and call to mind that last day at Lincourt when we stood together under the old oak tree and kissed and made friends.

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Well! I had been true in that no gay lady had won my heart, *that* was still in mine own keeping—or the king's. But what of her? doubtless she had wept and mourned my death in childish sorrow, and was now Madame with a house of her own, and only a soft remembrance for the lad with whom she had played and quarrelled whilst still a little maid.

It was in 1581, when the eyes of France, Catholic and Huguenot alike, were turned in some amusement and much wonder on the bloodless campaign Monsieur the Duc d'Anjou was waging in Flanders against Spain (a strange sight in sooth to see the son of Catherine de Medici upholding the cause of Protestants against the Catholics) and my royal master seemed in no immediate need of my poor services, that my thoughts, turning with much persistence to my old home, I begged of Henry to be allowed to resign my company for a short time into other hands.

To begin with he eyed me with suspicion, for this was a man naturally given to suspect, wherein is small wonder! "Art tired of my service, man?" he queried sharply. "The King of France gives better wages than poor Henry of Navarre?"

I flushed as I replied with some heat,

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"Sire, the motto of our house is 'For faith and honour.' I make mine 'For faith and Navarre,' thereby changing no whit the meaning."

He smiled at this, well pleased, and the look of suspicion changed to one of sly merriment.

"*Ventre saint gris!*" he cried, laughing. "If it is not money, I wager my crown there's a woman at the bottom of it. How, now, *mon St. Michel?*" For the sobriquet of Mademoiselle de Rébours had stuck to me.

"Nay, Sire," I replied, flushing again in some embarrassment. "There is one Comte de Lincourt too many in this kingdom of France, and I go to see how he is faring and how best I can remove him from that which is no right of his."

"Why not take the regiment with you?" inquired the astute Henry. "Or do you think single-handed to depose the usurper, my gallant slayer of dragons?"

"I would but see how the land lies first, Sire," I made answer, "and return straightway."

"And by my faith, we will make a raid on this too greedy kinsman and teach him his own lesson of might is right to another tune!" laughed Henry.

Bowing my thanks I withdrew, eager now with

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excitement to be off on my adventure, and the longing ever growing stronger to see my dear old home once more.

I was not to ride alone, for my friend and comrade-in-arms, Pierre de Buissac, was bent on accompanying me, and for escort I had young Henri Dubois, a very brave and faithful youth, who had come some few months previously with a message from Monsieur de St. Armande, and had stayed with me as servant ever since.

It was the month of October when we set out, and the first chill of autumn gave a pleasant keenness to the air. We crossed the Dordogne without adventure, and as we approached Brantôme, the nearest town to Lincourt, my excitement knew no bounds. Nay! had not de Buissac pressed me, I think I should have ridden on hot-spur, so great was my eagerness and impatience at delay. However, I consented to rest at the inn for the night, but long ere de Buissac stirred the next morning I was on my way once more, leaving a message and directions of the road with mine host.

'Twas a foolish thing to do, since, but by the merest chance, my companions might have ridden unsuspecting into the lion's jaws. But I was young and hot-headed, and did not pause to think. It was,

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however, with a lingering remnant of prudence that I tethered my horse to the trees some distance from the château, and with beating heart approached the home of my boyhood on foot.

CHAPTER VII

I RETURN TO LINCOURT

The October sun was rising like some round and fiery ball in the east, and the first rays of light were tinging the rustling leaves of the forest with added beauty as I stood at last with clenched fists and tear-dimmed eyes before the château of Lincourt.

The past nine years seemed suddenly to be blotted out as I gazed at the familiar brown turrets and sloping lawns, the *fosse* with its sparkling waters, and the old beech tree, under whose shade I had dreamt my happy day-dreams of boyhood. Almost I expected to see my father's stately figure in its black velvet suit and snowy ruff come out from the arched doorway to call me to him, and a great longing such as I had not felt for years brought the tears again to my eyes and the lump to my throat as I thought of Louis de Lincourt's treachery—and I cursed the villain again and again through my clenched teeth.

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There were no signs of people moving, at least I could see none from where I stood, gazing as if I could never gaze enough at my dearly loved home. But my reverie was interrupted by the sound of footsteps behind me, and before I could step aside to conceal myself I became aware that someone had entered the glade in which I stood.

I was not left long in doubt as to who that someone was, though his step was slower, his beard whiter, and his back more bent than of yore. I knew him at once for old Antoine, the seneschal, and drew back into the shadow of the trees till he should approach me. He did not raise his head as he came slowly on over the dewy grass, which seemed as if carpeted with gems where the early sunlight glinted on the sparkling drops, but when he was but a few paces from where I stood, I called his name softly, "Antoine."

He started as if he had been struck, and as his eyes met mine a look of wondering terror crossed his features, which became white and drawn, whilst his eyes had the wild look of one who sees an apparition. He clasped his hands and would have sunk on his knees in prayer had I not sprung forward, thereby proving to his scattered senses that I was of this world—not the next.

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"Who are you?" he gasped, still trembling. "Ah, speak, Monsieur, speak, the face—it is the face—and yet it cannot be, for he is dead these nine years."

"Nay, not dead, but living," I returned, softly, for we were near the château, and I was not minded that others should know my secret yet. "It is I myself, Antoine,—Monsieur Godfrey. Nay! rather Monsieur the Comte de Lincourt come back to claim that which has been stolen from him by foul means."

Never have I seen a man so moved as the old seneschal at these words. He fell on his knees, kissing my hands and bedewing them with the tears which rolled down his wrinkled cheeks, whilst he uttered broken thanksgivings and blessings in a choked, incoherent voice.

But this was no time to spend in welcomes. There was much I would learn, and a brief time for learning it in, for I was not minded to be taken like a rat in a trap this time.

"Nay, Antoine," I said, raising the old man with some difficulty from his humble position. "There is much I would know, tell me quickly how all fares at Lincourt, and if its new lord is here at the present hour?"

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"Aye, verily he is," replied the old man, recovering a little from his emotion, though he still clung to my hand, and looked hungrily at me as at one who had risen from the dead.

"Aye, and his evil son too, as all Lincourt knows to its cost. Ah! Monsieur Godfrey, why would not my dear, dear master take heed to the warning which bade him refrain from that fatal journey? When the news reached Lincourt, great was the mourning, and great was the cause thereof."

"How learnt you the sad tidings?" I asked with some curiosity.

He shook his head with the air of one who grieves over remembrances still bitter.

"It was Hugo, the man-at-arms," he said mournfully, "the only survivor, as we thought, of that blood-stained massacre, and truly his escape was a miracle. He told us that he was sleeping on the floor of the inn parlour, when he was awakened by a most mighty knocking at the door, and voices shouting, 'Death, death to the Huguenots.' He started up, as you may figure to yourself, Monsieur Godfrey, and to his amazement saw that whereas six of them had laid down to rest, four only remained, and his three companions still lay snoring, having drunken deeply over night with

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some comrades, to the good fellowship of Catholics and Huguenots. Well, Monsieur, to cut short a long tale, Hugo, seeing escape impossible, and his companions in no state to help make a fight of it, rolled under the parlour table and lay quaking with fear, as the door was burst open and a band of men rushed in with drawn swords; the three sleepers they killed as they lay, *ah ciel!* Hugo all but swooned at the sight of so fearful a crime, and then they rushed upstairs, the leaders shouting to the landlord to show them the room of the accursed heretic. Hugo says his blood runs cold as he thinks of those moments ere the murderers returned, and it is very truth, that from that hour the poor fellow's hair became as white as that of Mère Laroche. Outside the screams and cries, shouts and oaths became deafening, and Hugo declares he would have rushed out to meet death and have finished his agony, had he not mercifully swooned; nor does he remember more till the morning, when the serving wench, whom he had kissed over-night and vowed was the prettiest girl in Paris, although she was cross-eyed and very plain of feature, found him; and, being more woman than Catholic, saved him by hiding him in her room, and then sending him away with a white cross pinned on his hat, which she bade him

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keep, as it would be a safeguard from his enemies, And so in truth he found it, Monsieur, for he arrived home in safety, though in much fear and terror; and it was not two days after his arrival, that Monsieur le Comte,—pardon Monsieur, I would say Monsieur de Lincourt—arrived, and told us that our dear master had by the king's orders suffered death for his heresies, and that from thenceforth we must serve him. I think, Monsieur Godfrey, he knew not of your existence, though 'tis passing strange; but when he learnt of it he grew black with rage, and Monsieur Gaston muttered something of the page—and that he had doubtless perished, whereat they both laughed and bade me begone, for that Monsieur le Comte and his son too, if he had one, were in purgatory with Coligny and the rest.

“ Ah! Monsieur, those were sad days for Lincourt. Our new master would have had us abjure our religion, and threatened us with all manner of tortures if we proved obstinate, in fact he did cause Pierre Laroche to be racked for defying the priest he would have had instruct us, and old Nanon he burnt, but more for fear of her words than because she was a heretic, we all said; for she told him he was a murderer to his face, and bade him know that the rightful heir would yet return to claim and win

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his own inheritance.

"Then, because he found that if he would have tortured and burned us all for our faith, he would have to destroy the village of Lincourt and all his servitors as well, he desisted, and tried to break our spirits instead of our limbs by his tyrant rule. Ah! Monsieur le Comte, the good God has sent you to save us, when our hearts were fainting within us. Blessed be his name," and the old man wept afresh, whilst I stood there white and cold, yet with a burning rage, growing hotter and yet hotter in my heart, as I thought of this fiend who called himself Louis de Lincourt, and how he had robbed me of father and home, and trampled my people under his foot. I felt that I could not wait for the vengeance of Heaven to sweep this murderer and traitor from my path. But there was more to learn from old Antoine, although I was in haste to begone.

"The Sieur de Mauban," I asked, "does he still live? and his daughter, what of her—is she wed?"

He shook his head. "The fairest lily in France," he made answer, "but alas, one that may be plucked by wicked hands."

"What mean you?" I cried, for the old man's words were vague.

"Gaston de Lincourt seeks her for his bride,"

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replied he. "And would fain use force where——" he broke off suddenly, a startled look in his eyes. I listened too, angered at the interruption. It was the sound of horses' hoofs approaching the glade. I knew at once it must be Pierre de Buissac and Henri. At all hazards they must be stopped ere they approached the château.

"They are friends," I said quickly, turning to Antoine who had grown white with fear again. "I must hasten. Farewell, old friend. Yet stay. I must have further speech with thee. To-morrow, at midnight, in the picture gallery of the château. Do not fail me."

As I spoke, I turned to meet my friends in haste, leaving the old man standing gazing after me, speechless and wondering, glad, yet half fearful; whilst, as I turned at the corner of the glade to wave a last farewell, he raised his hand, and I knew that though he feared the vengeance of Louis de Lincourt, yet he would keep the tryst.

Pierre and Henri were awaiting me beside my tethered horse, hesitating whether to proceed or not, and Pierre hailed me with half reproachful raillery.

"We thought almost you had gone, *mon ami*," he said lightly, "to claim your inheritance single-

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handed, and hastened perforce to join you, hoping to be in time for the breakfast we had to forego at the inn. But wherefore such haste? The dew is still on the grass, and the sun not long risen. *Parbleu!* this air gives a man the appetite of a wolf. I have a mind to beard the inhospitable kinsman himself as a way-worn traveller seeking a meal."

"And get short shrift for your pains,' I laughed, as I mounted. "But come! I can lead you to a more friendly roof than that of mine own château for the present, and a good breakfast too."

"Nay, that is good hearing," responded Pierre earnestly, "for I warrant I would rather have a good meal than knighthood at the present time; for the rest, I am content to follow you, my Godfrey."

I will confess that my heart beat eagerly as we approached the château of Monsieur de Mauban, and I could have wished I had been alone and unattended as I looked round on the old familiar scenes.

Monsieur de Mauban was an early riser and had already descended, the servant told us, when we alighted at the door of the château.

I bade the fellow announce Monsieur Raymond de St. Armande, for Pierre with delicate courtesy had declared he would wait without till I had re-

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ceived the welcome of my old friends.

I had not dared give my name in full, as servants are not too careful with their tongues, and I would not that Monsieur de Lincourt should know of my arrival till I was ready to meet him.

Monsieur de Mauban rose from his chair as I entered,—bowing, but there was no recognition in his eyes as he answered my greeting somewhat coldly, with the question,

“How can I be of service to Monsieur ? I—”
But he got no further in his formal speech.

There was a little rustle of a woman’s garments from the wide window-seat—a little cry of glad surprise and pleasure, and the next moment a young girl was standing before me with outstretched hands—crying,

“*Ah ! mon père*—do you not see ? It is Godfrey, Godfrey himself, come back to us, as I ever said he would.”

If Mademoiselle de Mauban was thus quick in recognising me, I could not in honesty have returned the compliment.

This beautiful demoiselle with masses of wavy dark hair, dazzling complexion and sweet, innocent face was not my little imperious sweetheart of yore, though her great hazel eyes, shining now with shy

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pleasure, called back faint memories of the little maid who had waved me a farewell greeting nine years ago.

I stood looking down into those eyes as she paused there in the sunlight gazing up at me with a smile parting her lips,—and, though you may smile at me for saying it, I loved her—yes! loved her with all my heart, as I should continue to love her till my death.

But Monsieur de Mauban's voice broke the sweetness of the moment and I started as with an effort I came back to the present from my brief day, dream.

"Godfrey de Lincourt! thou art dreaming—Gabrielle, my child. Godfrey de Lincourt! impossible. And yet—*ma foi!* it is his face in very truth, though time has changed it. Can it be indeed so, the son of mine old friend." And the good man, reading assent in my eyes, grasped both my hands and wrung them the more warmly in the vain efforts to restrain his emotion.

"Back from the dead! Back from the dead!" he kept repeating whilst he still held my hands as if he thought me some spirit who would fade away into thin air.

With some difficulty, for he was old, and his wits

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were slow to travel at the speed I carried them—I gave the outline of my tale, the more briefly in that I knew my friend would be awaiting outside in no small impatience.

But at last he understood, and as he heard of my father's death the tears coursed unrestrainedly down his cheeks.

How long he would have stood plying me with questions, I know not, had not Mademoiselle's ready tact and hospitality changed the current of his thoughts. When, however, he learnt that my friend and servant accompanied me, and that we had ridden breakfastless, he was all anxiety and apologies. And Pierre de Buissac was soon sitting down in the utmost content before a well-spread board.

For myself, the excitement I had gone through had robbed me of my appetite, and I was glad to avail myself of Mademoiselle's offer to walk with her in the garden whilst her father entertained my less easily satisfied friend.

The sun had risen now in all his glory, though the cloudlets, which flitted like smoke wreaths over the blue sky, were still tinged with delicate shades of pink and yellow as we stepped forth. There are some scenes which are fated to remain indelibly

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painted upon our memories with the unfading touch of a master-hand, and it is the privilege of age to walk often in this picture gallery of the past, turning with a sigh or a shudder from some, yet lingering very tenderly before others, and none do I look back on with more love than that morning's walk with Gabrielle.

Ah! but I can see it all so clearly still. The wide lawns with their smooth green turf, where a great peacock in all the pride of his fine feathers strutted majestically, the broad terrace walk where a flock of Mademoiselle's pigeons preened themselves and cooed softly over their breakfast, watched all the time by the deerhound who lay dreaming of the chase, his grand head, which betrayed the nobleness of his breed, resting between his outstretched paws, whilst his sleepy eyes wandered lazily from the busy pigeons to his mistress as she stood beside me on the broad shallow steps leading down to the terrace, framed like some living picture by the old grey château.

How tongue-tied we were as we walked side by side along that terrace walk, verily, for all the world like a pair of shy babes, stealing shy glances at each other, and then looking away, for fear of being caught. But this could not go on for ever; invol-

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untarily our eyes met, and though I blushed like a boy at the encounter Mademoiselle burst into a merry peal of laughter.

“How foolish we are!” she cried, laughing still, “and there is so much I want to hear, Godfrey.” Her words but made my heart beat the faster instead of unloosening my tongue, although I had been rehearsing a speech for some minutes past. But now all thought had been driven from my head, for had she not called me Godfrey as of old?

But she evidently was expecting me to speak, for looking down I met her hazel eyes raised to mine with many an unspoken question in them. And I, like some great mannerless boy, forgot all I would say, or stopped for fear of saying too much. At last I found my voice.

“I promised to return for the nutting—Gabrielle—” I said, and though I paused half hesitatingly over her name she seemed in no way affronted at my audacity, but clapped her hands like a pleased child.

“And the nuts are ripe,” she cried blithely. “Ah! so many of them, never have the trees been so loaded. Come, Godfrey—a race to the wicket as of old!”

And the next moment she was off, whilst I, not

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minged to be beaten by her, set off in pursuit, to find her flushed and panting, leaning against the little wicket with laughter in her eyes and mouth.

It was a face made for laughter I thought as I too leant on the low gate and looked down at her. Every curve and line spoke of it, even to the dimple in her smooth pink cheek. And yet there was womanliness and strength of character about the firmly rounded chin, and a pure innocence in her eyes which made me contrast her with the grand court ladies with their simpers, their paint, and their fine arts, and wonder how such could ever chain a man's heart like this sweet maid.

"Come," said Gabrielle at last, as she regained her breath, "this is no nutting, Monsieur Laziness. Come to work—though alas!" as a sudden thought struck her, "we have no basket."

"My cap will serve," I replied lightly, falling in with her merry mood, and so together we wandered through the woods, and I grew careless of past or future and lived in the sunshine of the sweet present and the happiness of Mademoiselle's eyes.

Everywhere beauty seemed to surround us, the great trees with their autumn robes of russet brown and golden yellow, crimson and dull green, whilst here and there clumps of scarlet arbutos would catch

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our eye as the sunlight played in and out amongst the leaves. Close by a busy brook dashed singing and murmuring over white pebbles between mossy banks and it was here at last with cap and hands full of spoil we threw ourselves down to rest.

It was so peaceful and so lovely here that insensibly our gay chatter died and we were silent for a space. But silence was not long pleasing to Mademoiselle.

"Smile, Godfrey!" she cried with a touch of her old imperiousness, "do not look so grave and stern. *Ah, ciel!* but I should fear you, Monsieur, if you always knit your brows so!" and she drew her white brows down in imitation of mine. "And your eyes look—I cannot describe what they look, but as if you were angry—so angry!"

"Do they?" I said, smiling up at her pouting face, "yes, King Henry told me the same. I have forgotten how to laugh methinks, and yet—King Henry said——"

I paused half teasingly, for I liked to see the impatient toss of her little head.

"Yes, what did he say?" she cried, falling into my trap at once.

"He said, he thought a woman might teach me."

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She flushed now, rosy red from chin to forehead, and began playing with the nuts on her lap.

"Think you he was right, Mademoiselle?" I asked, speaking more softly still.

"I know not," she replied, forcing herself to speak lightly. "In truth, Monsieur, how can I, for you were but a boy when you left Lincourt. Tell me, Godfrey," and she bent forward eagerly to look into my eyes, "why did you return now, after these nine years?"

"To see mine old home and learn whether Monsieur de Lincourt still lives to enjoy that which he won by craft and murder," I said abruptly.

Gabrielle sighed. "Did you not want to see *me*?" she questioned softly, and there was a plaintive ring in her tones which made me curse myself for a brute and long to tell a glib lie. But it was not in me, so I could only make answer weakly.

"In truth, mademoiselle, I thought—I thought—well! that ere this you were married and——"

She turned her innocent eyes upon me in surprise. "But, Godfrey, I was betrothed to you," she said softly, and then, as my pulses beat thickly with joy at her words, she flushed more deeply than before and rose quickly to her feet. "I—" she stammered

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"it grows late, Monsieur, and my father will want me, I fear."

But I detained her, in spite of her protests. "And did you not think me dead, Gabrielle?" I asked, and her colour came and went at the tenderness in my tone.

"Nay," she whispered, plucking at the husks of a nut she held in her hand. "Nay, I always said—you would—come back. But, Monsieur!—we must not delay, your friend Monsieur de Buissac will think us——"

But I cared no jot what Monsieur de Buissac thought, or for that matter, the whole world either.

And though I kept pace with her hurrying feet, I was minded to have my way. Aye! and had it too, for all her imperiousness, for as we came to the old oak tree which had been our trysting place in childhood, I checked her.

"Gabrielle," I whispered, "dost remember when last we stood here together?"

She smiled at me in spite of her blushes. "Aye, that do I," she replied merrily, "thou hadst told me thou wouldst fight a duel for a fair lady in Paris, because none would fight for me. I was but a babe, you said, and so I ran away, and—you ran after me—and——"

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“And I promised that no fair lady should win my heart,” I whispered, “and we sealed the compact with a kiss. Is it not so, sweetheart?”

I saw her drooping eyelids flutter, but she did not speak, so taking my heart in both hands I continued,

“I have kept the promise, Gabrielle, *ma mie*,— wilt thou not give me my reward?”

But the old oak tree was the only witness to her sweet reply.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW I FOUGHT MY FIRST DUEL AND WHAT CAME OF IT

"And so you would take the old man's one ewe lamb, Monsieur?"

And though there was a jest in the words, yet there was sadness in Monsieur de Mauban's eyes as we sat alone together that evening.

"Nay," I replied impetuously, "nay, Monsieur, say not so. I would you should gain a son, not lose a daughter. Neither could I claim her till I have won back mine inheritance; all I ask is that the betrothal of our childhood shall be verified."

He nodded his white head thoughtfully. "You speak as your father's son should speak," he said kindly, "and I will tell you that I would sooner give my Gabrielle to you than to any other; nay, on the word of a gentleman, I promise her to you, as far as it is in my power. But, Monsieur, these are perilous times, the peace of Bérgerac is but a hollow one. The League grows ever more powerful. The king is weak."

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"Nay, but how should all this affect us?" I asked with hot impatience.

Monsieur de Mauban sighed.

"Listen, Godfrey," he said, "and I will tell you all. To begin with, as you know, your kinsman—the false de Lincourt—is a renegade. Still worse, he is the friend of Monsieur de Guise and a hot Leaguer. Ere now we should have suffered at the hands of such a neighbour but that his duties to his master and the pleasures of Paris have kept him from Lincourt, besides, he has another fair estate not far from Tours which he owns through his wife, a Mademoiselle de Labaille, and which, rumour has it, he loves better than Lincourt, which depresses him. However that may be, till the last six months, he has never been here. And his son—a man more deeply dyed, if it were possible, in treachery and sin than his evil father—has paid his court to Gabrielle. She, poor child, scorns him, aye, even reviling him to his face. Yet her scorn but inflames him the more, and he swears she shall be his."

I swore between my teeth, but listened attentively.

"Gaston de Lincourt is not the man to hesitate in using foul means to gain an end he cannot win by fair ones," said Monsieur de Mauban sadly. "And

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Huguenots have little claim on the sympathies of justice in this realm. Already Monsieur le Comte—as he calls himself—has used threats, and though I have no immediate fears, still the announcement of a formal betrothal to another might call down swift vengeance, for I am an old man, and mine enemies are powerful.”

My heart turned within me as I listened to Monsieur de Mauban’s tale. I could scarce resist the impulse to ride to Lincourt and fling a challenge at this recreant wooer, but that I knew so mean a cur would have no fancy for facing my steel when a stab in the back could as easily rid me from his path; and the thoughts of this and Gabrielle’s peril made me the more determined to use caution.

Long into the night we sat talking, and when at last I sought my couch the grey light of morning was stealing over the horizon.

The next day was one of pure happiness. Although no word of our betrothal had been spoken, the good Pierre seemed to understand all, and after congratulating me with some quiet raillery, betook himself off with Henri for attendant to fish in the Dronne, which flowed not half a mile from the château, thus leaving Gabrielle and me to the sweet joy of our own company.

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I had not forgotten my midnight tryst with old Antoine, indeed I looked forward to it with much eagerness, since I had already formed a plan for the confusion of mine enemies, and the triumph of my happiness. But I must learn first in full detail the defences of the Château of Lincourt, and whether Antoine could help from within when, with the connivance of Henry of Navarre, I made my attack from without.

All these plans I did not tell Gabrielle, for maids have a shrinking from deeds of war and bloodshed, and I would not cloud the sunshine of her fair face. But one charge I gave her as I told her of my tryst, and that was the safe keeping of my precious crescent, which I looked upon as a faithful talisman of good fortune. She gazed at the beautiful jewel as it lay flashing in the sunlight from its dark case, with a pretty wonder not unmixed with fear on her face.

"But if I should lose it, Godfrey," she expostulated in much trepidation, looking at the crescent as if she expected to see it fly away of its own accord.

I laughed lightly. "No fear of that, *ma mie*," I returned, "'tis after all only for one night that I would give it to thy keeping, if the charge be so onerous a one; though *one* day." I added proudly,

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"it shall sparkle in my wife's hair when I present her to His Majesty of Navarre."

She laughed at this, though she still eyed the jewel with some doubt, then raised her face to mine with a new fear upon it.

"Thou art not going to danger, Godfrey?" she questioned tremulously.

"Nay! nay," I assured her, "'tis but in case I might drop or hurt the crescent in my climb. Fear not for me, sweetheart, thou shalt laugh with me at thy misgivings, little coward, when I come to claim mine own!"

And so the matter ended, and no shadow of presentiment whispered to me of the long years which were to pass ere I saw the flashing stones of my talisman again.

The night was clear as day when I stepped forth an hour before midnight wrapped in my cloak, to make my way to Lincourt once more. Overhead the moon rode in her full beauty in the starry heavens, shedding her soft yellow light on my path, and I was glad of it, for beneath the trees the shadows fell thick and gloomy. The path was narrow, and the distant howling of wolves bade me beware how I wandered from my way. Indeed once or twice as I went, I fancied I caught the glare of

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savage eyes, and heard the crackling of the undergrowth as of a heavy body pushing its way through the tangle. But I passed safely enough, and came at last to the bank of the fosse which surrounded the château.

I had now to advance with the utmost caution, for I knew not what watchful eyes might be peering from the closed windows and battlements before me. But now my early knowledge of the place stood me in good stead, for where a weeping willow drooped across the water the shadows lay deep, and the projecting branch so hung that I could swing myself across without getting more than a slight wetting.

Now the worst part of my task was to come, but I had planned all before, and stole along the shade of a low wall towards the beech tree which grew close to that side of the château where the picture-gallery lay.

Quick as thought I flitted across the open lawn to the shelter of this tree, my heart beating fast, it is true. It is no easy task to climb a tree with the scabbard of a sword between your teeth, but I was not inclined to leave my faithful friend behind me, and in those days I was possessed of the agility of a cat. The hour of midnight was solemnly tolling

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forth from the great clock in the turret, when I scrambled lightly from the tree on to the sill of the open window. I had, in fact, dropped to the floor of the gallery, before I became aware that the tall man in the rich dress of brown velvet, standing with his back to me gazing up at a picture which was just then flooded by the soft moonlight was *not* old Antoine.

For a moment I stood thus—motionless in the first shock of surprise, for although his face was turned from me, I recognised in the tall, thin figure, with its narrow peaked head of red hair, Louis de Lincourt himself, whilst the portrait at which he gazed was my mother's.

I suppose the slight click of my sword startled him, for he swung swiftly round, and there we stood, gazing at each other in silence, whilst I saw his mottled, wine-besotted face grow white and flabby as he turned slowly from me to the picture, and then back again. I was not surprised at this, for I could see the likeness myself, a likeness the more easily traced in that, despite the all-prevailing fashion of the times, I was clean-shaven; and I think I must have looked like some avenging spirit as I stood there—sword in hand.

"Who are you?" he gasped at length, through

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pale lips, fumbling the while with his own sword, whilst I stood there, a multitude of thoughts surging through my mind.

“Comte Godfrey, Raymond de Lincourt,” I made answer slowly, “the son of the man you murdered on St. Bartholomew’s Eve,” and as I spoke a wild tide of rage surged up in my heart as I thought of that August night nine years ago, and I would have killed him, all unprepared as he was, in my fury, had not my father’s last words rung in my ears ; and so I refrained from striking, whilst the colour which had fled from the ruffian’s face at my words came slowly ebbing back and his eyes took again that look of deadly cunning which was natural to them.

“Aha !” he sneered mockingly. “A likely tale indeed ! as for murder, the late Count died by the order of the King of France, a death he justly merited and which his *son*,” and he laughed again, the cold, taunting laugh of a fiend, “shall now taste for himself,” and, with a lightning thrust, the cowardly villain made at me with his drawn sword, and my career had been speedily cut short had I not sprung aside and caught the sword point on my cloak.

It was no question of taking vengeance now, but

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a fight for dear life, and I stood on guard with my drawn blade as Louis, quickly recovering himself, came again to the attack. He must have been over fifty years of age but he was none the less agile for that, and I knew at once that I had to contend against a practised duellist, whereas I was new to the work, although no mean swordsman. It was life and death now—death to one of us ere the yellow moon had sunk below the shadow of the beech tree.

We were silent, though Louis de Lincourt snarled from time to time and his gums were drawn back over his wolf-like teeth which gleamed like fangs through his thin red beard, and his eyes sparkled with a truly fiend-like hate as we moved to and fro, parrying, thrusting, struggling, whilst the fitful moonlight flickered upon our shining blades and white faces. Once my foot slipped on the polished floor and I felt his blade draw blood from my shoulder, but it was only a flesh wound and goaded me on to fresh fury. Already his face was beginning to wear a look of mocking triumph when I caught him by a quick thrust in tierce and he staggered back against the wall, then slowly, very slowly, sank to the ground, his evil eyes of hate and baffled rage fixing themselves on mine as if they would burn themselves into my soul, his thin lips drawn back

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from his teeth in a ghastly grin, whilst the curse he tried in vain to utter died in his throat. It was a horrid sight and I would fain have turned away, but his eyes held mine, till, with a groan he fell forward, his sword, which he had clutched to the last, dropping from his nerveless fingers with a clatter on to the polished floor. The noise was echoed at the far end of the gallery by a little cry which startled me afresh and I had half redrawn my sword from its scabbard whither I had thrust it, when turning I saw Antoine hurrying towards me. Poor old man ! his face was as white as the moonlight which shone upon it and his hands were raised in the extremity of his fear.

“ Oh, Monsieur Godfrey ! Monsieur Godfrey ! ” was all he could say for some minutes, whilst so overwhelmed did he seem that I had perforce to put my hand on his arm to steady him. He had evidently seen all, for he had entered the gallery at the same moment as I but had not dared to make his presence known. I was glad of it for he could if need be bear witness that this was a duel forced upon me, and no midnight murder. How Louis de Lincourt had chanced to be in the gallery that night we could make no guess, but Antoine told me that he was ever restless, and whilst at Lincourt

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seemed to be haunted by some disturbing nightmare, at which I wondered not.

Antoine and I stood talking together at some length, whilst the shadows from the beech tree grew longer and deeper as the moon sank beneath the level of the high window and the body on the floor became an indistinct mass. Our plans were of course changed by the death of Monsieur de Lincourt, and I told Antoine that I should at once return to Nérac whither he must send me a message in a few weeks' time of how matters stood. I could not be suspected, as none knew of my existence and for the matter of that, as Antoine said, Louis had many enemies at whose hand he might have fallen.

In a few words I told Antoine that I was resting at Monsieur de Mauban's that night and should start for Nérac next day, adding the news of my renewed betrothal to Mademoiselle Gabrielle and bidding him let me know should any danger threaten her from the villain Gaston. As I spoke methought I heard the sound of a movement from the fallen figure and in some trepidation stepped forward.

"It is not possible that he should live!" I said to Antoine, who had blanched again at the sound. "My sword went well nigh through him;—but hark,

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what is that?" And, as I spoke, I straightened myself from my bending posture—for I would have doubly verified my words—and listened. Yes! it was no fancy now; clear and distinct came the sound of footsteps—voices—shouts. All was lost! Someone must have heard the clang of swords or the heavy fall—the household was aroused!

"Quick, for the love of Heaven, Monsieur Godfrey," cried Antoine in agony. "The window, the window! there is yet time!"

"But what of you?" I queried, hesitating to leave the old man to face my pursuers alone.

"Oh delay not, Monsieur, they approach," he cried, wringing his hands. "For me, I can say I too have been aroused. They cannot suspect an old and unarmed man; but you—oh, Monsieur, I beseech you delay not!"

Nearer came the approaching sounds. Clearly they did not yet know from whence the noise that had aroused them came. There was yet time, and though it seemed to me a coward's part to fly, still I thought of Gabrielle, and, as old Antoine said, he could stand in no danger from my flight.

So I threw my leg over the ledge of the window, and with my sword again held firmly between my teeth, I sought and found the friendly tree with my

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legs, and swung softly downwards to the ground. It was a narrow escape, and I paused to listen as I stood a moment under the shelter of the leaves, but no sound reached me from above, and in a few minutes I was across the *fosse* and speeding through the dark forest.

I had not gone a hundred yards before I heard a pistol shot ring out from the château behind me, and as I paused to listen I thought I must be pursued, but no further sound was heard. All was silent, and I guessed that it must have been but a random shot, or, that though my dark figure had been seen my would-be captors knew how hopeless a chase would be in the darkness, for the moon was waning now, and soon impenetrable darkness would surround me.

I quickened my pace to a steady run, for I had no wish to lose my way in the labyrinth of paths which surrounded me, and as I look back on that night I feel that it was in truth a miracle that I ever succeeded in tracing my way without taking a wrong turning, or falling a victim to the wolves which howled around me.

My mind was full of disquieting thoughts. This unlucky duel would shatter many of the fair castles in Spain that I had built up. All depended on

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what manner of man Gaston de Lincourt proved himself. He might carry his grievance to Monsieur de Guise himself, and I felt that though I could not be suspected whilst I remained unknown, yet the moment I declared myself or put forth a hand to claim mine inheritance, suspicion would attach itself to me at once, a suspicion which would be further confirmed when it was discovered that I had been here at that time, and I should find myself hunted from corner to corner of the kingdom for murder.

Ah, well! I had old Antoine's witness,—and after all—'tis poor work to meet trouble half way. So I reassured myself as at last I reached the château, but my reassurances did not give me the comfort I had hoped for, and my heart was heavy with vague forebodings as I crept in at the open window, which Monsieur de Mauban had left for me, fearing the talk of the servants should they know of my midnight adventure.

It was on the stroke of two o'clock that I entered, but I was glad to find de Mauban and de Buissac both awaiting me.

They exclaimed in surprise at my appearance, for I was much dishevelled, and there was blood on my doublet where de Lincourt's blade had pinked my shoulder.

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Both men listened with grave attention as I told my story, and de Mauban's brow was knit in much anxiety as I finished.

"The sooner you are safe at Nérac the better," he said thoughtfully. "Gaston de Lincourt has a large following of men-at-arms, and if you were caught it would go ill with you, since the peasantry would be useless against trained soldiers."

"I would not delay a moment," I returned, "for it may be that even now they are on my track, but I fear we should lose our way in the darkness of the forest, besides giving rise to suspicion, for the servants would doubtless wonder at so hasty a departure."

"And for the sake of my child we must avoid all such suspicions," said de Mauban, sadly. "Nay! rest here to-night, and to-morrow ride with loose rein to Nérac."

But at his words my heart misgave me; the awful thought that suspicion of harbouring me, and swift vengeance, might fall upon the de Maubans almost unnerved me. On the moment my resolution was taken.

"Not so, Monsieur," I said firmly. "We leave in very truth to-morrow morning, but not en route for Nérac. Suspicion would follow as surely as

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night follows day. We leave our horses in the stable as if we went for a stroll, then seek shelter till the first danger has passed, when we will return to bid you farewell, and ride south at our leisure."

"But where will you shelter?" questioned de Mauban, doubtfully. "All will be lost indeed, if your hiding place is discovered, and Gaston de Lin-court is not the man to spare his enemies."

"Nay," I laughed, a sudden inspiration coming to me. "I will wager all hopes of mine inheritance that neither Gaston nor his followers would discover my lair, did they search the forest for a year." And I then disclosed to my listeners how, in the days of my boyhood, in gratitude for what she called my deliverance of her from the stones of the village lads, old Nanon, the witch, had shown me her secret hut, so wondrously concealed by Nature itself that all passing would but think they saw a wooded knoll with a rugged, rocky facing. My plan met with de Buissac's approval, and together we persuaded Monsieur de Mauban to see as we did, not without some misgiving on his part, though he could not but be grateful for our anxious solicitude for him.

We agreed to tell no word of the duel to Gabrielle, but merely to say that it was necessary for us to

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absent ourselves for a day before our departure—
verily a poor excuse! but one that had to serve our
purpose, for we would not cause her unnecessary
alarm for our safety.

CHAPTER IX

THE VENGEANCE OF GASTON DE LINCOURT

We found to our cost the next morning that Mademoiselle Gabrielle was not so easily put off, and I had to endure the reproach from her pretty eyes, as she implored me to tell her if any fresh danger had arisen.

I tried to laugh at her fears, and kiss away the anxious trembling from her lips, but to little purpose, and I could see the great tears standing in her eyes as we said farewell once more. But time pressed, and if I would have yielded to the pleading in her face I could not, and so, with another kiss, I tore myself away, trying to smile light-heartedly as I went.

"It is but *au revoir, ma mie*," I whispered as a last word of comfort. "But *au revoir* till to-morrow at day-break; whilst the dew is still on the lawns we shall return, never fear; 'tis but a day!" She sighed and tried to smile in answer, but the smile quivered piteously, and unable to look

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at her distress, I hastened after de Buissac, who was already half way down the avenue with Henri.

We reached our shelter in safety, no little to my pride, for it was many a long year since I had wandered through the woods, and Nanon's lair was well concealed. De Buissac was charmed with it as well as surprised, for indeed it was most cunningly formed by a natural hollow, and the festoons of creepers over the entrance gave added safety to the secret.

Inside, however, the atmosphere was close and stifling; there were still traces of occupation, an old mattress, rotten and worm-eaten, lay in one corner, whilst a rickety table stood propped up against the wall with a time-stained, mouldy cloth upon it and a book, whose pages were brown with damp, and covered with mould, though we could discern strange figures and signs within, which made Henri, Protestant though he was, cross himself and mutter a prayer, for witchcraft was firmly believed in, in those days, and the power of an evil eye could haunt a dwelling long after the owner had gone to his or her last account. In fact, I believe poor Henri would more readily have faced the steel-clad leaguers, than stay in this rat-in-

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fested, witch-haunted hovel, if he had had his way, and I am not sure that de Buissac had not repented his bargain, ere that long and tedious vigil was ended.

Food we had in plenty, but there was little sleep for us that night, and at the earliest streak of day light we were on our way, thankful to be breathing the pure air once more, though my heart was still full of anxiety and the vague presentiment which ever warned me of coming trouble.

In vain I tried to fall in with de Buissac's merry mood; I started and turned pale as the veriest coward when a hare bounced up from its lair and scurried across our path, my knees shook under me when a foul raven from a neighbouring tree uttered its dismal croak three times as we passed. De Buissac rallied me again and again and declared I was a sorry lover to be returning to my mistress in so woe-begone a plight, and under his kind-hearted raillery I plucked up heart of grace, and had grown almost cheerful when, as we neared the château we were startled in good earnest by a man rising suddenly from the bracken beside the path, and we had all drawn our swords before I recognised Etienne the falconer, old Antoine's

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only son, and at sight of his face I knew the worst had befallen, and that my presentiment had come true.

He dropped on his knees before me to kiss my hand, whilst the tears ran fast down his bronzed and rugged face.

"Speak," I whispered hoarsely, "for the love of Heaven tell me what has happened?"

"Alas, alas," he sobbed. "Alas, Monsieur Godfrey, that I should meet you again after all these years with such news."

"Speak, man!" said de Buissac impatiently, for he could see that the strain of suspense was unmaning me. "If ill has befallen 'tis no time for tears—but revenge."

The words acted like a tonic upon the poor fellow, he rose from his knees, dashing the tears from his face, and in low, rapid tones, broken by choking sobs and curses and with many wild gesticulations, told the awful tale. So awful indeed that had not the necessity for action kept my head clear, I think I should have swooned or gone mad.

It appeared that scarcely had I disappeared from Lincourt on the preceding night than the door of the gallery was burst open and the aroused house-

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hold, headed by Gaston de Lincourt himself, pistol in hand, had rushed in. Etienne had been amongst those who accompanied him, and was a spectator of all that followed. The moon still lighted up the farther end of the long gallery, and, to the astonishment of all, the sight that met their eyes was old Antoine standing beside a prostrate figure, sword in hand.

“What are you doing here, old man?” roared Gaston in fury. “Whom have you been murdering, you villain?”

Antoine had faced about upon his questioner at once. “It is Monsieur le Comte,” he made answer simply.

“As you may imagine, Monsieur,” said Etienne sorrowfully, “I thought *mon père* was mad, it was incomprehensible, impossible, that he, an old man of eighty, should slay Monsieur le Comte with a sword; but Monsieur Gaston was blind with rage and fury, he screamed forth oaths so fearful that the dead might have stirred in their graves to hear him, and, approaching my poor father he shot him so that he fell to the ground as dead, whilst Monsieur Gaston spurned him with his heel as he lay there. *Ah ciel!* I would have throttled him there and then but that I was a coward and the

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fear of death was upon me. Some of the men took up Monsieur and they said he was not dead, for he groaned as they raised him, but for me, I saw only my father lying there, bleeding and wounded to death, so I hid myself, and when they had all gone, I stole back to the old man's side, and he told me how that I was no longer the servant of Monsieur Gaston but of Monsieur le Comte Godfrey de Lincourt, and I must remember that to die for such a master was but a little thing; he himself was glad indeed to have had the honour of it if it saved Monsieur any inconvenience, and I too must be ready to serve and die. He could say no more, for the death struggle was upon him, and he died in my arms." Here the poor fellow broke down utterly and my own cheeks were wet as I thought of this poor old man who had died the death of a hero, whilst I wrung Etienne's hand in sympathy. But I had not heard the worst. Slowly, haltingly it came, and the sky and earth grew cold with dumb horror around me as I heard.

Louis de Lincourt was not dead, or rather had not been dead, though mortally wounded, and, like a dying adder, he had raised his head to give his enemy a last mortal bite of venom. He had heard,

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and when he recovered from the long swoon into which he had fallen he related all—yes, all that fatal conversation between Antoine and myself, even telling how, after I had gone, old Antoine had seized his sword wherewith he hoped to outwit his enemies by taking my deed upon himself; and, when the tale was ended, Louis de Lincourt, traitor, murderer, and liar had gone to answer for his deeds to his Maker, whilst Gaston went from the room of death with a smile of such cold devilry on his face that the very menials shrank from him.

All had been bustle and confusion, but Gaston had a way of making men serve him from fear even swifter than the service of love, and it was not long after noon before he put himself at the head of his men-at-arms and rode off through the woods to Mauban.

* The rest of the story Etienne learnt from Mademoiselle de Mauban's maid, who had been an eye-witness of the tragedy that was to follow.

Mademoiselle and her father were walking on the terrace, whither the maid had just come with a cloak, for the morning was chilly, when the galloping of horses was heard, and presently, round the corner came Gaston de Lincourt himself accompanied by

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three troopers. Gaston, the maid said, was livid with rage, for he had just heard from Louvais, the major domo, that we had been gone since early morn. He immediately went up to Monsieur de Mauban and a fierce altercation had ensued, the drift of which the maid had had difficulty in catching, for, at the appearance of the soldiers she had hidden herself behind a flowering shrub; but she made out that Gaston was using vile threats to induce de Mauban to give me up,—a course he most indignantly refused—then in a flash, before Mademoiselle could divine his purpose, Gaston had drawn his sword and pierced Monsieur de Mauban to the heart. He had fallen at once, lifeless, whilst Mademoiselle, with a terrible cry, flung herself upon his body; it needed but a glance to tell even her inexperienced eyes that he was dead, and then had followed an awful scene. Mademoiselle entreated Gaston to kill her too, and when he mocked and insulted her with speeches of love, she flew at him like a suddenly aroused tigress and scratched his face down with her nails so that the red blood spurted out. He had sworn terribly at this, but Mademoiselle shuddered, as, instead of striking her down as she had hoped, he smiled, like the devil he was, and, seizing her by the waist, cried

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tauntingly—

“By my faith, pretty one, your nails are too sharp as well as your tongue, but they shall both be well trimmed when you are my wife, I promise. Come! we have a long ride before us, but there will be a different sparkle in those pretty eyes before we reach the château of Labaille!” And with that he had dragged her off, in spite of her screams and struggles, and placing her before him on the saddle had ridden off, laughing, whilst the maid had gone in search of Etienne, who happened to be her lover, and told him all. After long counsel Etienne had determined to linger close to the château to watch for me in case of my return, “for,” he added, “Marie told me that your horses had not gone, and that Monsieur had expected you back shortly, a fact which Monsieur Gaston arranged for, by leaving ten of his men to watch for you, with orders to join him speedily on the road to Tours, bringing you either dead or alive.”

For some minutes I was so stunned with this fulfilling of my forebodings that I could think of nothing, only I seemed to see my Gabrielle's face of agony, the pleading in her terror-haunted eyes and hear her sweet voice calling for me in vain! in vain!

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It was too terrible, and I should have gone mad in the contemplation of it had not de Buissac voice roused me.

"We must follow at once," he said, and the words recalled my wandering senses to the necessity for immediate action.

"Yes," I cried wildly, seizing at the idea as a drowning man may clutch at even a straw in a sea of despair, "we must follow quickly, we will gallop night and day, we——"

"Hush, *mon ami*," said de Buissac gently, "you are unnerved, but do not despair; we will save her yet; only for the present, leave all to me. The first thing is to steal our horses from under the noses of the troopers; can you manage that for us, my friend?" he asked, turning to Etienne, who stood now, calm and pale, all eagerness to help. He nodded.

"Where?" he replied laconically.

"Here," said de Buissac glancing round him, "it is safer, as we might lose each other in this forest, and you could perhaps put us on the road?"

Etienne smiled, "I know every path for ten miles round, Monsieur," he replied proudly. "I can take you by a short cut which will save you some hours

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of difficult riding before you could get clear otherwise of the forest."

De Buissac nodded, and without waiting for further parley Etienne glided away noiselessly, leaving us to keep patient as well as we could till his return.

What a lifetime did it appear till we heard the sounds of his approaching footsteps again. I was in a purgatory of suspense, whilst around me even nature itself seemed to mock my agony, the birds sang their merriest songs, the sunshine danced amongst the gold brown leaves, the fresh autumn breeze bent the nodding harebells and stirred the whispering echoes of the forest glades, whilst the busy rabbits scuttled in and out amongst the bracken, growing bold as they peeped at our motionless figures on the pathway.

No word was spoken till we heard the muffled clatter of horses' hoofs on the grass, and Etienne, hot and breathless, came riding up, with two free horses at his bridle.

"Parbleu!" he whispered, as he swung to the ground and held the great chestnut mare for me to mount, "it was a difficult task and would have been impossible but for the good little Marie. There were two troopers, bah! the dirty Guisards!"

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—and he spat vigorously on the ground,—“who kept guard by the stables. I did not dare to approach till Marie came out and fooled them into accompanying her to the kitchen where she promised them wine. They rose like trout to the fly, whilst as for me I slipped in as soon as their backs were turned and took the horses ; but messieurs had best lose no time for it will not be long before they discover their loss and guess the trick, and then they may pursue.”

There was no need to bid us hasten ; we were all eagerness to be off and were soon full trot down the forest path, with Etienne running beside my horse ; he was a great runner, this slim, dark-eyed son of the south, and possessed the peasant's powers of endurance. Mile after mile we trotted on with him beside us running at the same swinging step, in no wise distressed or panting, though the beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and ran down his bronzed face as we drew rein at last on the borders of the wood.

“Messieurs cannot mistake the way. It is straight on from here,” he said, pointing to the great white road leading northwards, “the Château de Labaille, whither Monsieur Gaston was bound, lies near Mettray some few miles

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from Tours, but perhaps," he added hopefully "messieurs will come up with his party before they arrive."

I shook my head, for I knew we had given the fox too long a start; then, with warm thanks to our good guide, who, with tears in his eyes, protested it was but a small part of the service he would do for Monsieur le Comte, we spurred onwards, but not before I had given him the special charge to see to the proper and honoured burial of Monsieur de Mauban, a charge he readily promised to fulfil. And so we left him gazing after us, divided between an evident longing to accompany me and a still stronger desire to return to his beloved Marie, for he knew that did the soldiers guess her complicity in the trick played upon them it would go ill with the poor girl.

Thus through the autumn day and far into the night, long after the stars were shining in the clear heaven and the waning moon cast her sickly glare around, we rode on, silently, grimly, whilst one thought only seemed to burn like fire into my brain, one name seemed to beat out in the ceaseless reiteration of our horses' feet.

Gabrielle! Gabrielle!

Ah ciel! should we be in time?

CHAPTER X

THE HAUNTED MONASTERY

I have said that we rode with loose rein, but though I fretted at each smallest delay, still there is a limit to the endurance of the best of horses and the most untiring of men, and I confess that as the grey light of morning crept over the dark heavens my head swam, and from time to time our horses stumbled ominously. We had but an hour before passed the town of Chabanais when de Buissac's beast stumbled badly, and on investigation it was found that he had lost a shoe. For a few moments I was in despair, since the road was a lonely one and the horse was too lame to proceed, but fortunately at this moment Henri pointed out that a little to the left of us lay a small village partly hidden by a sudden dip in the ground, and thither de Buissac led his horse in the hope of finding a smith who could put matters right. It was now quite light, and de Buissac suggested that whilst

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the horse was shod we might breakfast. It was a reasonable proposal, but by great good fortune as it turned out, I was perverse, and insisted on waiting for him where I was, bidding Henri, however, who looked wistful at the suggestion of breakfast, to accompany de Buissac, whilst I, tethering my horse to a tree, threw myself down on a grassy knoll in much disquietude of spirit.

But nature was too strong for me, and I think, in spite of my anxieties, I slept, for I was startled presently by hearing running footsteps and de Buissac, his face aglow with excitement and delight dashed up the slope where I sat, half dazed with sleep, and grasped my arm.

"News, glorious news, *mon ami*," he cried gladly. *Ma foi !* but Bébé should be shod in gold for so fortunate an accident. What think you? Mademoiselle de Mauban is *here*—close at hand—she is safe, or rather will be ere long."

You may imagine my excitement, in fact such a torrent of questions did I pour forth, so great was my eagerness to be gone in search of my Gabrielle that it was with difficulty de Buissac could detain me.

"Be reasonable, de Lincourt," he urged, "and I

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will explain all."

Whereat I strove to calm my impatience and listen attentively.

"My first inquiry on coming to the village," he began, "was of course to find out where my horse could be shod, and learning that it could be done at the smithy opposite the only inn of the village I proceeded thither, and in due course entered the 'Grey Boar' with Henri, in search of breakfast. What was my surprise and no little alarm to find the parlour filled with a party of some ten soldiers, guards evidently.

"I glanced at Henri, to warn him to be cautious, and withdrawing to a side table ordered our breakfast. The soldiers were too busy over their meal to heed us, and their talk was unrestrained. Presently I caught the name of Lincourt, and you may figure to yourself that my ears were on the alert. The leader, a great heavy man, of a most vile countenance, whose nose was blue and seamed with a deep sword cut, was bragging of his last devilry. Then they fell to discussing their present venture and thus I learnt all. It seems that Mademoiselle fell so ill with fatigue and terror that Monsieur Gaston had perforce to halt, and after much discussion she was taken to a Cistercian nunnery

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situated on the hill opposite this village, although Gaston was furious at the necessity, for he could not delay, having, I gathered, some business of the Duc de Guise's on hand. However, he left the men behind to mount guard over Mademoiselle and orders to bring her on with all speed to Mettray as soon as ever she could sit in the saddle. You may imagine that the troopers did not relish the job, and were busy cursing Monsieur Gaston, for whom they seem to have little love, and women in general, besides Mademoiselle in particular. My blood boiled to hear the foul-mouthed brutes, but my position was critical, so I was silent and ate my breakfast.

"Presently the men, having finished, clattered out to see to their horses, and I lingered awhile to see what I could learn from mine host; but he was difficult to squeeze on most points and I could only gather that the name of the village was Brêle, and that it was seldom they had strangers there, owing to the secluded position the village lay in.

"'What then is that great building yonder?' I asked, for I was minded to find out where Mademoiselle was hidden.

"To my surprise the fellow turned pale and

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crossed himself before replying.

“‘It was a monastery of the Cistercian brethren,’ he said at length, in an unwilling tone. ‘But they have long left.’

“‘Left!’ I echoed ‘wherefore? and who lives there now?’

“He looked as if he would faint, but replied at length that the monastery was now little better than a ruin. Then, glancing over his shoulder, as if he feared the Evil One was behind him, he whispered,

“‘Ah, Monsieur, speak not of it; it is haunted, *ah ciel*, in very truth it is, there can be no doubt. Many, many in our village have heard the cries and groans of the terrible spirit who strives in vain by ghostly penances to expiate his sins, and now none dare go near the place after nightfall for fear of beholding the spectre!’

“‘And who is this ghostly visitant and what sin does he still mourn?’ I asked, for I wished to hear the whole tale.

“‘It was the Abbé Lefère,’ quoth mine host with much rolling of his eyes, wherewith he would fain have impressed me. ‘A great abbé of the Burgundian side in the civil war in the reign of Charles VI. It is said he invited to his monastery

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a large party of Armagnac nobles, and when they were seated at table he caused them to be massacred; but for the crime he is now condemned to wander for ever about the scene of his sin weeping and crying for the mercy he refused to show.'

" 'A very terrible tale,' I said, trying to appear duly impressed. 'And the presence of such a spirit might well drive the good monks to seek more peaceful quarters. But what of the nunnery, good fellow? are not the sisters afraid of the presence of so unholy a neighbour?'

" 'In sooth I know not,' he replied, all unsuspectingly. 'The nunnery to be sure is some quarter of a mile to the left of the monastery, though for my part, I should require a yet wider berth. But every one to his own taste, Monsieur; the good sisters perhaps are too holy to have fear, and as they are ever at prayer perhaps the Evil One would not dare approach them.' I agreed, and having learnt all I could, I hastened here, mon Godfrey, to tell you the good news! Say then, is it not well? "

" 'Aye,' replied I, grasping his hand warmly. "You are the best and most discreet of friends, and now what think you is best to be done? We must

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e'en move warily, the more so, that from your description methinks I and this scar-nosed scoundrel have crossed swords before;—and a man with a grudge has ever a good memory."

De Buissac nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Now the first thing is to let Mademoiselle know of our presence; and how that is to be done puzzles me, I confess, for the gates of a nunnery are not easily opened to the first man who knocks at them."

"I have a plan," said I slowly. "You say that this place of spirits lies close to the nunnery? Let us, therefore, make it our head-quarters. We shall at least be near, and perhaps an opportunity will arise for us to send a message to Mademoiselle de Mauban."

Pierre assented, and summoning Henri, who stood awaiting us with the horses, we told him whither we were bound.

The poor boy's face was a study. The fears of superstition which had been roused by the landlord's tale, were struggling with his budding manhood and his desire to appear unaffrighted. He answer, however, and was about to mount made no when de Buissac stopped him.

"Nay!" he said, "we are fools for our pains.

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Did any see three mounted men ride to the monastery in broad day, suspicion would be roused at once. Let us wait till nightfall and then make our way thither."

To this we both agreed, and so we waited—though how long and dreary were those hours! Night seemed as if it would never come, and I, for one, was thankful when the shadows grew long upon the distant hills, and mounting our horses, we rode slowly forward, skirting the village by a short *détour*.

As we came nearer we saw that the monastery was indeed but a ruin. In fact, in several places the walls had fallen in and the whole place was ivy-grown, weed-choked and dilapidated. Seen in the fading light there was certainly an air of profound mystery about it, and I heard Henri catch his breath in a little gasp of terror: but I said no word, for it is better to brace than to sympathise with a man's fears. The road now became very rough and uneven so that we had to dismount and lead the horses carefully along; they must be our first care we well knew, for without them we were helpless. However, we succeeded in stabling them in sufficiently good quarters, and gave them their feed, for de Buissac had that morning had his saddle bags well

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filled, and then proceeded to explore for ourselves. The shadows were growing longer and longer, twilight was rapidly creeping on to night as we crossed the old weed-entangled garden towards the better preserved part of the great gloomy building; overhead the bats wheeled with their ghostly whirring of wings, down in the pond the frogs croaked loudly, whilst ever and anon a great owl would go flapping past us from the ivy with its shrill discordant cry. The air was chilly without, but when at length we stood in the darkness of the cloisters, we shivered in the damp mouldiness of the atmosphere as we had not before.

"Come!" said I, trying to speak cheerily, "we are neither old women nor children to be frightened at a foolish tale. Let us find a resting place within less damp and foul if possible and then try and forget our hunger in sleep. In sooth, mon Henri, you shall go for an early forage to-morrow or we shall all starve in this rat hole!"

My companions did not answer, though I could hear Henri muttering a prayer to himself, and I guessed that de Buissac, to whose southern blood superstition was second nature, was far from comfortable. For myself, I was not without my trepidations, as, after much walking and stumbling

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we came to a room which seemed on a much lower level than the rest for it was warmer though dank with mould ; we were in total darkness, and I was about to call on Henri to light the lantern we carried with us when a sound close beside us suddenly froze us dumb and motionless to the spot where we stood.

Clear and distinct though faint it came, a long drawn out, sobbing moan as of a creature in mortal agony. For a moment we were all too paralyzed to speak, making no doubt that the noise came from the disembodied spirit of the Abbé Lefère. In another moment we should see the gleam of his white cowl, perhaps catch a glimpse of his burningeyes. The terror nerved me to action.

"The light, Henri!" I whispered hoarsely, "the lantern, man, don't you hear? For the love of Heaven be quick!"

But Henri was too terrified to do more than gasp out a prayer, whilst I heard de Buissac muttering a confession of his sins, till my own fear gave place to anger, and snatching the lantern from Henri, I proceeded to kindle the light, though I confess that my hand trembled in a fresh access of dread as again that awful moan rose from the corner of the

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room like the piteous sobbing of a lost soul. De Buissac's teeth were chattering like castenets now, and Henri giving himself up for lost fell on his knees in terror. But the lantern was alight at last and the thin stream of light soon flooded the room. It was empty.

Although we had all expected this, I think that the confirmation of our fears, added to our dread, when de Buissac, who had been leaning against the wall, now suddenly started forward, then, as for the third time the low eerie cry sounded through the chamber, he leant his ear again to the wall.

"By Heaven, Godfrey!" he cried in horror, "the cry comes from this wall. There is someone here: listen."

In much wonder, I too placed my ear to the wall, and truly as once more the faint moan was heard it distinctly seemed to me that it was breathed through the very wall beside me. De Buissac, white with excitement, held the lantern aloft, whilst Henri who had lain like one dead upon the floor in the extremity of his superstitious fears scrambled to his feet.

"See," cried de Buissac, "these stones have lately been displaced, there—and again here.

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Quick, de Lincourt, take the lantern! there is some fiend's work here," and drawing his dagger from his belt, he inserted the point into one of the stones of the wall.

It was as he said, quite loose, and after some slight difficulty, owing to the uncertain light, he succeeded in removing it. His limbs trembled with excitement, his breath came thick and short, even Henri was fired by his example and volunteered to hold the lantern whilst he worked.

It was a difficult task and our daggers became quickly blunted by the contact with the rough stones; but the moans which now came at longer and yet longer intervals were clearer, and there was now no doubt that some wretched victim lay entombed behind the wall. It was too awful to think of, and the horror of it lent speed and strength to our work. De Buissac indeed was in a frenzy of excitement and I scarcely less.

On we worked, whilst the pile of crumbling stone and brickwork grew ever higher at our feet; we were close now to the victim, whoever it was, and, we guessed it must be a woman from the sound of the cries. The sweat poured down our faces as we laboured on, and at last, *at last*, a tiny aperture was

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made. But there was no glad cry of deliverance, even the faint moans had ceased; were we too late?

Infuriated at the thought, we threw ourselves to our labour again with redoubled vigour, and at last the opening was large enough for us to look within.

How our hearts beat as Henri held up the lantern, and we peered into the deep cavity we had made.

Yes! the cries had proceeded from no disembodied spirit, for before us, death pale, and fainting, a young girl stood, propped up in her awful prison, dressed in the white habit of a Cistercian monk; the cowl of white having fallen back disclosed a face of such beauty as even I had never seen before; but the dark lashes swept cheeks as white as alabaster, and as de Buissac lifted her gently out of her horrible tomb the fair head fell back heavily upon his shoulder.

"Alas," I said sorrowfully, "we are too late." But de Buissac shook his head.

"Let us seek the air," he said shortly. "Who would not swoon or stifle in so foul a den?" and so, preceded by Henri with the light, we left the chamber of death and horror, de Buissac carrying

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his fair burden in his strong arms.

Outside the moon had risen high, casting fantastic shadows and bright patches of light over the old garden. De Buissac laid his burden on the grass, and we tried to force a few drops of wine from a flask I fortunately carried with me, down her tightly-closed lips, but for some time without success.

"If we had but some water," sighed de Buissac. "If we had but some water, we might yet restore her."

I thought of the pond we had seen before at the bottom of the garden, and volunteered to go in search of it. It was not easy to find, for the garden was large, and divided by a wall into two parts, but after much stumbling over the grassy mounds and stumps of trees, which were hidden in the long rank grass, I succeeded in discovering it and filled my cap with the water, which, owing to the recent rains was sufficiently good. I had to pick my way most warily as I returned with my precious burden, and as I approached, I could not help being struck with the weird picturesqueness of the scene before me.

The dark outline of the great monastery, with its dimly seen cloisters, the rough, neglected garden

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where the moonlight gleamed here, on a straggling rose bush bearing one or two late sweet blossoms, and there, on a rustic bower where flowering creepers had clambered and hung down in luxuriant profusion, whilst in the midst knelt de Buissac, his dark handsome face silhouetted against the light as he bent down to look into the fair unconscious one resting so helplessly on his shoulder, white and set as some sculptured face of a dead saint, and Henri, standing in the background swinging his lantern backwards and forwards to keep off the too inquisitive bats which whirred and fluttered around his head, attracted no doubt by the light.

De Buissac looked up eagerly as I stood at length beside him.

"She is not dead, *mon ami!*" he cried joyfully, "See, already her eyes unclosed, the colour returns to her cheeks, we have saved her!"

I bent down—yes! it was indeed true, for, as de Buissac spoke, the heavy eyelids quivered, then slowly opened, whilst with a deep sigh the poor girl tried to raise her head from its resting place.

"Is it death?" she whispered, so faintly that de Buissac alone caught the words as he bent down.

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"No, Mademoiselle," he answered softly, "do not fear, you are safe and amongst friends; be well content."

But in spite of his reassuring words a look of terror crept over the delicate face, as once more the great dark eyes closed and she lapsed into a fresh unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XI

SNATCHED FROM THE JAWS OF DEATH

It was not until the next day that we heard the story of the unfortunate girl whom we had rescued so timely from a terrible fate.

For some time during that night, we doubted whether after all we had not come too late. Terror and suffocation had well nigh done their cruel work, but, thank Heaven, after many hours during which we hung over her in anxiety and suspense, she returned to a full consciousness, and as the grey dawn crept over the eastern skies, she fell into a light, but refreshing sleep, and we laid her on a rude couch made of our cloaks in the shelter of the cloisters, though de Buissac still insisted on our watching beside her for fear she should wake affrighted.

But the sun was already high before she opened her eyes, and after the breakfast, provided by Henri's early foray, she was so far recovered as to

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be able to tell the tale which I will repeat as closely as possible in her own words.

"My name is Denise de Montelart," she began in a low sweet voice as she sat propped up by our cloaks on the old garden seat we had discovered in the ruined bower.

"I am the only daughter of the Marquis de Montelart who owns much property in Aquitaine. To my father's great grief he had no son, so the title must needs pass to strangers; but my portion was a large one, and when I grew up, both my parents determined to wed me to a noble, very great, but also poor, who would gladly have had me for the sake of my dower but whom I hated, since he was both bad and cruel, as well as being old and ill-featured; still, doubtless, I should have been forced to obey, had not I met with one about that time who opened my eyes to God's truth. My fiancé was the first to suspect my growing faith, and immediately went to my father announcing that he must withdraw his proposals, as on no account would he wed with a Huguenot and a heretic.

"Then followed a stormy scene, my mother wept, my father raged, but I, seeing a chance of escaping my unwelcome suitor, but clung the more firmly to my obstinacy; and it ended in my being sent to this

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nunnery, whose abbess happened to be a distant kinswoman of my mother's. For two years I have lived a life of such misery as only those can know who have unwillingly found a shelter behind convent walls. At first they tried persuasion, entreaties, finally threatenings, persecution ; and I should have yielded—for my faith was but then in the bud and I had clung to it more for expediency than love—had I not found a friend, ah, such a friend ! a saint indeed, if ever there lived one on this earth. She loved me too, although as a professed nun she was taught that all earthly love was sinful. I confided in her, and finally showed her the Testament which I had concealed from all eyes ; at first she looked at it askance, and bade me put temptation aside ; but at last she was overcome by my words and took the book to read. And the seed which had grown so slowly in my soul, sprang at once to flower in the rich soil of her noble mind. She read, and the veil of her superstition was torn from her eyes, as with the trust of a little child she accepted and believed the truth, which now flooded her heart. Her eager joy kindled my slow faith and urged me to fresh resistance, to the rage of the Mother Abbess.

“ Convinced that all threats were unavailing, the latter took a bold course. The convent was poor,

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my dower rich. All was right, she must have argued, for the good of the Church. She wrote to my parents saying that I had returned heartwhole to my early beliefs, entreating to be allowed to take the veil immediately, and that the Pope was ready to relieve me from the usual noviciate and allow me to take the vows at once, with my parents' consent.

“Thus, by one brilliant stroke, the Mother Abbess would secure to herself my fortune and my family ; for there was no doubt that praise would accrue to her for the powers of persuasion which had induced me to take so praiseworthy a course.

How she gloated over me when she came to my cell, and read to me my father's answer, in which he gave his ready assent to my joining the Cistercian Sisterhood, as the good Mother (so he called her) had assured him it was the only way his unhappy daughter could be saved from falling back into the errors of belief from which she had now been rescued.

In vain I wept and entreated to be saved from such mockery, declaring that never, never would I utter vows in which I had no faith ; she laughed, telling me they could dispense with my consent ; and left the cell, bidding me prepare for the service which, unwilling though I was, would irrevocably

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shut me within those walls till death should set me free.

"*Ah !* Messieurs, the agony of those hours. But there were worse to follow.

"My dear friend, the *Sœur Angélique*, came to me at night when all slept, for she had heard the news of my sad plight and had come to suggest the only way by which I and she too could escape fate, and that was—flight.

"For a time I hesitated, since I knew the awful retribution that awaited us if caught; many a dread whisper I had heard of nuns who thus tried to break from their living death, only to find themselves brought back to one which blanched the cheeks of those whose nerves were strongest.

"But *Sœur Angélique* urged her point.

"How could we, she argued, to whom the light had been vouchsafed, live the lives God had given us in acting and allowing a lie?

"I listened, for her arguments were good, her hopes of making our escape were high, and at last I consented.

"Then she told me her plan. It was her duty to help the lay sisters that week in the refectory work, and she had contrived to gain the assistance of the convent gardener, who promised to meet us at the

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gate and open it for us, providing horses also on which to make good our escape ; he was to place a rope ladder in the basket of vegetables he would bring to the kitchen next day, a basket which Sœur Angélique would be there to receive.

"All seemed simple and easy enough, and once we were free of the convent it did not trouble us what happened. The gardener's wife promised to send suitable dresses for us to don, as soon as we had escaped ; for the sight of two nuns (I was already made to wear the dress of a novice) riding through the country would speedily have effected our recapture ; and for the rest there was a safe shelter for us in Gascony, under the protection of Henry of Navarre.

"So we planned and plotted, and our hopes rose high at the thoughts of freedom. The Mother Abbess, and indeed the whole community, were at a loss to understand my demeanour, for I was not sufficiently schooled in strategy to hide my feelings ; and I was happy, so happy, that I could not but sing like the imprisoned lark, who after his captivity sees again his green fields and woods.

"At last the day came. *Ah ciel !* What a day of hopes and fears ! But all went smoothly. We had secured the ladder, the descent was easy enough for

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me, who was young and lissom, though a more difficult matter for Sœur Angélique who was somewhat advanced in years; but all was safely accomplished at last, and we crossed the convent garden with our guide who was awaiting us below, according to his promise. The key grated in the lock, in a moment we should be free. I clasped Sœur Angélique's hand in my glad thankfulness, when lo! horror of horrors, the door swung back—and there—instead of horses ready for our flight, stood a number of white-cowled figures. In a flash we saw all. The gardener had betrayed us. We were lost.

Ah! the agony of that moment, messieurs, I cannot describe! but we were allowed no time for thought; immediately our arms were seized, cloaks flung over our heads, and almost swooning with terror we were dragged along in the darkness.

“Whither we went I could form no guess, though I could feel it was not back to the convent, but my knees bent under me and my head grew dizzy from the great fear that seized me, though I could not have screamed, for my tongue was paralyzed. On and on we went, ever downwards it seemed to me although there were no steps, yet steeper and steeper grew the declivity and I think I should have swooned altogether had we not suddenly come to a

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halt and the cloak which had served both to gag and blindfold me was removed.

"I found myself standing in a dimly lighted cellar, damp and foul; a table stood in the middle and at this was seated the cowed figure of a monk in the habit of a Cistercian, but from the jewelled cross on his breast, I guessed him to be a dignitary of high degree; at his side sat the Mother Abbess herself, her keen, cruel eyes roving from one to other of us in malignant triumph. Several other monks were present, but so closely were their cowls drawn over their heads that their features were not discernable; in the midst of them stood our betrayer, his face twitching with terror and evidently reduced to the extremity of fear, whilst beside me stood Sœur Angélique and her face, messieurs, was like the face of an angel, so sweet, so pure, so courageous that it strengthened even me to face our cruel judges; and judges they were, ones too to whom the sentence was already known as they went through the mockery of a trial. I will not weary you with the details, suffice to say that the gardener had betrayed all our plans to the Mother Abbess and she had prepared the counter plot which was our doom.

"Then the sentence was passed, and I swooned

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in real earnest this time when I heard the terrible words that we should be placed alive in niches which should then be filled up, 'a death,' the wicked judge declared, 'which was provided in the clemency of holy Mother Church for her recreant daughters, so that they should have time to reflect and repent them of their many sins.'

"I have said that I fainted on hearing this dead sentence and when I awoke it was to find myself alone with Sœur Angélique bending over me, in a tiny cell. For some time I scarce remembered all that had happened, and as it came back to me I clung to the kind sister weeping in a frenzy of despair.

"In vain she tried to comfort me, pointing to the crown beyond the cross; but I would not be comforted, it was too hideous a present to be able to see beyond, and my faith was quenched in despair.

"But when, finally, Sœur Angélique broke down, and weeping blamed herself for being the cause of all my undoing, I had to turn comforter, and at last refreshed by prayer we sat in some calmness to await what would next befall.

"Where we were we could not guess, for Sœur Angélique said that after sentence had been pronounced she had been again blindfolded and led

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through many paths to the cell in which we were confined.

"For some time we waited, then, with beating hearts, we heard the key turn in the lock, the sound of heavy bars being removed, and two cowed figures entered.

"We both rose and kissed each other, for we felt death was near.

"But to our surprise and my horror I was pushed aside whilst Sœur Angélique was seized and carried out.

"Then the key again turned in the door and I was alone.

"This was a fresh horror. I had at least hoped to meet death side by side with my friend, to be strengthened with her words and the sight of her brave, sweet face.

"But I was soon to learn the reason for this last piece of fiendish cruelty. I was to have another chance.

"It was not long before I again heard the key turn, but my surprise was very great, when instead of seeing my executioners advance into the cell I beheld the tall, veiled figure of the Mother Abbess herself.

"Then I knew what was coming, for the Mother

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was a very serpent of cunning, and my fears were fully realized.

"After dwelling at length on the horrors of my coming fate, the awful suffocation, the slow death that crept phantom-like upon its unfortunate victim, the terrible thirst that would rack the frame, the pains of starvation and horror of pitchy darkness, this fiend in human shape held out her offer. If I adjured my heresy and voluntarily took the vows, I should live, nay! I should be honoured and made much of. Life should be as bright as convent walls could make it, penances should be dispensed with, I should be happy.

"But Sœur Angélique's faith had strengthened my own. How could I accept a religion which had done to so foul a death my dearest friend? I stood firm. Yes! in spite of the Abbess's entreaties, promises, threats and expostulations, the good God upheld me and at last she left the cell vowing that the sentence should be no longer delayed.

"I was glad when she was gone, and in spite of my coming death I ate and drank the food that had been thrust into the cell. I knew I should need all my strength to carry me through without shrinking. After what seemed an eternity of suspense I once more heard approaching steps, and closed my eyes

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in a last prayer for help as the white cowed figures of two monks entered the cell.

“ ‘There is no need for the cloak this time,’ one muttered to the other with a hoarse chuckle. ‘The good sister will not be finding her way back along the secret path.’ And so I was led forth with my eyes unbound.

“What was my surprise to find that I was close to the chapel of the convent, indeed, I was now led across the chapel itself. It was night, for the moon shone through the windows upon the high altar, but still further to my astonishment I found myself conducted to a low door whose existence I had never suspected, so cunningly was it formed in the oak carvings, and this I found led downwards by a narrow passage. On and on we went, and in spite of my horror I found myself observing that the walls were damp with mould, and the ground slimy, so that I could not forbear shivering, which drew a low laugh from one of the monks.

“Never shall I forget that walk. It seemed indeed the valley of the shadow of death, death, death around and before me. And oh! how fast the warm life blood ran in my veins, how sweet the world appeared. I found myself thinking and conning over the happy days of childhood, of the woods

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and meadows where I have played and sung, as they say a drowning man will dream as the waters lap over him and woo him to death.

"But ah me! no swift one like his of painless dreaming was to be mine, and the terror which had seized me before clutched me again as I stood in the chamber of death. It was awful to think of, awful to know that somewhere behind those walls languished she who had been my friend; but no sound broke the silence, except the chip, chip of the stones where two brothers worked at my grave."

"At last all was ready, and I, wrapped in a monk's habit and cowl for shroud, was placed within my tomb.

"I had no tears to shed, no cries to utter. In dumb agony I stood there, scarce realizing that in a few moments I should for ever be shut out from life, air and freedom. In a vague way I was conscious that one of the monks with a mocking laugh placed a small pitcher of water and a piece of bread in the tiny cell, bidding me refresh myself when I had need, as I should have thereby more time for reflection.

"Then, before the men who had hollowed out my living grave had begun once more to rebuild it, the first monk, who seemed the one in authority stepped forward.

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“ ‘Daughter,’ he said, addressing me in a soft and would-be persuasive tone, ‘bethink thee once more of thy fate; soon will the awful death of suffocation steal slowly upon thee. For hours, perhaps days, thou wilt linger behind that wall with death in its grisliest form gnawing at thy vitals. Thou wilt cry, but none shall hear, thou mayest implore, but none shall answer, and before thee will lie only the eternity of damnation reserved for vile heretics. Listen then, daughter, and be duly thankful for the clemency of Holy Mother Church who even now at the eleventh hour will forgive and receive thee back to her bosom. Confess then thy sin, repent of thine obstinacies, or die the death thou hast so richly merited.’

“ ‘Nay, Father,’ I answered boldly enough, for his words maddened me, ‘I had rather trust to the mercy of my Saviour than to the cruel and false Church which calls itself by His Name. I had rather die than place my hands in fellowship with those whose arms are elbow deep in the blood of the innocents.’

“He gnashed his teeth in fury at my words, and I saw his eyes gleam ferociously at me from under his cowl.

“ ‘Die then, accursed heretic!’ he hissed angrily.

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. And may the Holy Virgin show you your sins ere you go to your eternal doom.'

"'Nay!' I answered once more, 'it is to the Lord Christ Himself I look, and in His Name I charge you to answer for this foul murder before His Throne.'

"He screamed with inarticulate rage at my words, pouring out curses upon me and ordering the monks, who stood resting on their spades, crossing themselves in much fear, to fill up my niche with all speed. Whilst they complied with his words he stood by watching them at their horrible task with a fiendish smile on his face, whilst the fourth monk held aloft the lantern and I saw his lips muttering prayers, but whether for the good of my soul or the damnation thereof I know not, nor did I care, for the horror of my awful fate was growing ever more terribly upon me, so that I should have shrieked and screamed in my agony, aye! and even perhaps have entreated to be saved at the cost of my immortal soul, had not the thought of *Sœur Angélique* upheld me, and I prayed my Saviour to strengthen me in my hour of need, even as she had been strengthened. I smiled as I thought of how ere long we two should meet again beyond the sting of death.

"At last the work was finished, the sound of the

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monk's feet had passed away, all was silent as the grave and I was alone—alone in the pitchy blackness of my prison, scarce able to breathe, unable to sit or kneel. I leant back against the wall of my niche overcome with the terror which overwhelmed me in spite of my prayers. I was alone with death. Life was for ever shut out from me—my doom was irrevocable. Oh! Messieurs, I cannot describe to you the agony of that moment, but heaven was merciful—I fainted.

‘ That swoon was my salvation, else when you found me I had either been a raving maniac, or else indeed—dead. For whilst I fainted I was not absorbing the precious air of my prison. I know not how many hours I remained unconscious, but they must have been many, and when I opened my eyes I could scarcely realise where I was. But the hideous truth soon revealed itself to me, for death seemed already to have laid his icy touch upon me; my head was heavy and throbbed with strange pains, which shot also through my cramped limbs, my mouth was dry and burning, my tongue swollen and cracked; I breathed with difficulty; then suddenly I remembered the pitcher of water, and I strove to bend down to reach it, for I had no strength to resist what would only be the means of prolonging

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my misery. For some minutes I thought that my efforts would be in vain, so difficult was it to move in the narrow space, but at length I succeeded in raising the pitcher to the level of my mouth, and I felt the cool sweet water trickling down my throat. Oh! what relief it was, but yet how dearly bought, for it revived my failing senses to the reality of my situation, and a groan burst from my lips at the thought of it. Pains racked me—my brain whirled—grinning and demoniacal faces seemed to peer at me out of the darkness, the voices of many waters were in my ears. I strove to pray, but the laughter of fiends seemed to drown the words, I could only moan in my agony.

“But at last—after how long I known not—I thought I heard a sound from outside. The wall of my prison was thick and I could catch no voices, but surely, I thought to myself, it is the sound of one who strikes the wall. Then again silence; and I moaned afresh in my pain—but once again the sound reached me, and I strove to cry—to speak—to entreat to be freed—anything—anything to be freed from my sufferings. The noises which filled my head seemed to swell into a loud roar, so that I could hear no more, my head turned giddily, but in spite of all, one glad thought filled my heart—death

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had come at last to the rescue—I should be free—free. And with these words hammering upon my brain I swooned afresh. The rest—Messieurs,” added Mademoiselle de Montelart stretching out her thin little hands impulsively towards us, “you know,—but oh! Messieurs,” and her great violet eyes filled with tears as she turned them first to me and then on de Buissac who knelt by her side, “I can never, never express to you my gratitude for what you have done. Ah, but you will understand how I can never forget, never repay it. May the good God repay it to you through all your lives.”

I was deeply moved at this touching but terrible tale of the sufferings of one so fair yet so unfortunate. But de Buissac’s feelings were even more strongly stirred, for tears were running down his bronzed cheeks as he bent to kiss the little hand which lay in his.

“Ah, Mademoiselle!” he cried, “it is we who thank God for guiding us to the spot where you lay; for us—we did nothing but what your words repay us ten-fold. Ah! Mademoiselle, believe me——”

But I did not hear more of the speech, for there was that in his eyes as he raised them to hers which made me remember a message I would fain have given Henri, who was employed in feeding our

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horses close by. So, making my excuses, I withdrew, feeling that I could trust de Buissac to give all necessary explanations, and disclose to Mademoiselle de Montelart the reason for our having sought shelter at so auspicious a moment in the old monastery of the Cistercians.

CHAPTER XII

THE GHOST OF THE ABBE LEFÈRE COMES TO THE RESCUE

But what of our plan to rescue Gabrielle? That was the question which racked me as I strode backwards and forwards along the narrow avenue of limes which bordered the monastery wall.

It was all very well for de Buissac to have his attention so easily withdrawn from our original campaign by the thrilling adventure of last night, and the charming company of Denise de Montelart, but it was not Mademoiselle Denise's pale face and violet eyes which haunted my vision as I paced anxiously to and fro between the trees, but Gabrielle's,—my Gabrielle's—with a wistful pleading in the hazel eyes, and a pitiful droop of her sweet mouth, as I had seen it last on the terrace steps of the Château de Mauban. And I ground my teeth as I pictured to myself afresh the maid's story, and

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drove my spurred heel deep into the soft gravel path, as I thought of my darling struggling in the arms of her father's murderer. Ah! the reckoning I had to pay with Gaston de Lincourt grew heavy, and I swore beneath my breath that it should be paid to the last coin. But idle threats of vengeance would not free Gabrielle from her prison. We must act! aye, and act swiftly did we not want to wait till the fowler had again snared the bird, which fluttered within his grasp.

But what was to be done? To see Gabrielle, to let her know we were here was impossible. A thousand wild schemes I thought of, each to be rejected as futile; once I meditated entering the nunnery by the secret passage of which Denise de Montelart had spoken, and, sword in hand, demand Gabrielle of the Mother Abbess. Again I thought of personating de Lincourt's messenger come to fetch her away; but one by one my schemes were cast aside, and I was rapidly reaching a state of despair, when a fresh plan darted through my mind pregnant with hope and possibilities. Yes! at last I had found a way, and in my excitement I stopped short to glance back at the rustic bower where Mademoiselle de Montelart and de Buissac sat, seemingly engrossed in each other's company; but

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I knew de Buissac was as true as steel, besides it was obvious that if he had become blind to aught else but Mademoiselle Denise's violet eyes, yet, for her sake, he would do all in his power to aid a scheme which would bring her to a place of safety. Yes! I would go to them and lay my plan before them.

Both looked up as I approached, and my heart smote me for my ungenerosity, as Denise de Montelart turned to me with tears in her beautiful eyes.

"Ah, Monsieur le Comte," she said gently, "Monsieur le Buissac has been telling me all, and why it was you sought refuge here, and we have been wondering what can be done. If I could but help you, I would do all in my power to save Mademoiselle from a fate scarcely less cruel than mine own."

I bent over her hand to hide my emotion.

"Mademoiselle, you are an angel!" I replied.

"I was but now coming to unfold to you my plan, a plan which, though perhaps dangerous, is the only one I could devise, for difficulties beset our path on every side."

"They do, indeed, *mon ami*," said de Buissac, "and right glad am I you have hit on some way to

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defeat them, for I confess mine own poor wit seeks in vain."

I laughed—I could afford to laugh now—at his comical face of disgust at his own failure; and sitting down beside Mademoiselle on the gnarled stump of an old tree, I related, to them both, part of the idea which had come to me.

"To begin with," I said, "I have sent Henri back to Chabanais for food, since 'tis dangerous work for strangers to forage in so small a village as Brêle; the folk will talk and compare notes till it reaches the ears of our friends at the 'Grey Boar,' and these will speedily be on the alert. The good woman from whom Henri purchased bread this morning looked at him askance and asked him sharply enough where he lodged and how he had come hither on foot. It was with difficulty he satisfied her curiosity with a tale of having been deserted by his master and robbed of his horse, but at Chabanais he can get all that is needed and no questions asked, also I have bidden him get suitable clothes for Mademoiselle to wear, for—" and I glanced at the monk's habit of white in which she was enveloped, "we should not go far without question did she ride in such a guise. Besides," I added smiling, to check the words of gratitude I

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saw on her lips, "I have need to borrow Mademoiselle's present costume, so I have ventured to tell Henri to get her clothes such as would be worn by a lady's travelling maid, for as such methought she would be safest. I have bidden him also purchase a horse, if she is equal to riding?" and I looked questioningly at the pale, delicate face resting so wearily against our impromptu cushion. But the violet eyes brightened into animation at my words.

"Yes, yes, Monsieur," she cried, eagerly. "*Tiens!*" and she clasped her small white hands with an impulsive gesture. "How glad I shall be to be away, far away—" and she glanced round towards the ruined monastery as she spoke. "But," she added doubtfully, "Monsieur speaks of my escape, not that of Mademoiselle?"

"But I have a plan in my head." I replied, trying to speak lightly, though to tell the truth I was torn with anxiety. "A plan however that depends so much on what I learn in Brêle that I shall not disclose it to you, on second thoughts, till my return."

"To Brêle?" echoed de Buissac in much surprise. "Nay, Godfrey, my friend, what would you not risk by venturing down there, amongst your enemies? Did you not say you had met this croque-mort of a

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captain before ? ”

“ Aye,” I replied, “ but what of that ? If we run no risk Mademoiselle will never be free, and 'tis safer for me to enter the village than for you, for what would mine host think at seeing the passing stranger return the day after his departure, springing from nowhere. Nay, that would indeed be rash and lead to the marring of my plot. Be content, *mon ami*, I shall do nothing foolish, if but for the sake of Mademoiselle ; and I think my wit is e'en sharp enough to conceal my identity from Monsieur of the scarred nose—so—” and I bowed gallantly to Mademoiselle Denise, “ I will for the present say *au revoir*, leaving you in charge of Mademoiselle ; be careful not to wander from the garden for we know not how near curious eyes may be. I have bidden Henri wait till it grows dark before approaching our hiding-place with his horses.”

De Buissac nodded. He could not well refute my arguments which were but simple truths, and though the brave fellow was ever covetous of the task which promised most danger, yet methinks for once he was not loth to be left to the sweet enchantment of Mademoiselle's company.

So, waving them adieu, I strode down the weed-entangled path, my hat drawn well down over my

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face, and the cloak I had again resumed flung back so as to the better conceal my features.

I had all the feelings of a man who enters on a game of skill with an antagonist who has already many points of vantage, and I could have enjoyed the zest of pitting myself against the strategies of Monsieur Gaston did I not tremble as I thought of who and what was at stake.

Outside the monastery wall I paused to take in the situation, and so that you may the more clearly understand what I shall presently relate I will try to describe carefully our exact position.

I now stood in a narrow road, leading in one direction down hill to the village, and in the other bending to the left towards the nunnery. On one side of this road ran the high wall of the monastery, covered in a heavy mass of ivy, which in some places had dragged it down, leaving cavities which however had in most cases been covered by festoons of ivy and creepers. On the other side the road was bordered by a low hedge, and beyond this stretched green fields which sloped down towards the village, or stretched away upwards in the direction of the high road, though here the view was interrupted by a belt of trees; a similar belt also fringing the lower part of the hill, thereby shelter-

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ing the village doubtless from the strong north winds which would sweep down from the moorland above.

After pondering for some minutes, I retraced my steps to that part of the monastery which we had converted into a stable, and saddling my chestnut mare I mounted, and making the *détour* by the upper belt of trees I turned towards the village as if I had come northwards from the high road. But I was too wary to enter the village itself without reconnoitring the enemy, so dismounting and slipping my horse's bridle through my arm I crept carefully forward to where, from a post of vantage, I could command a view of the "Grey Boar."

For half an hour I waited thus, crouched amongst the undergrowth, but saw nothing save the steep village street up which passed to and fro a few peasants all intent on their peaceful daily concerns, but presently, when I was beginning to contemplate making a hazard of approaching the inn, I was rewarded by seeing the inn door swing back and our friends, the Guisards, come out, talking and gesticulating together as they made their way to the stables. Now was my opportunity, though a risky one, for the men had not gone far, but it was useless

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to delay, and swinging one leg over the saddle I went back to the road and in a few minutes had drawn rein before the sign of the "Grey Boar," and, beckoning to a fellow to hold my horse, made my way with a sufficient swagger into the inn parlour. Mine host was busy clearing away the men's breakfast, but he left his task on seeing me, and with some surprise on his sleek face asked what I wanted.

"A bottle of the best d'Arbois!" I cried, trying to speak in a rollicking tone. "None of your miserable vin du pays, remember—I have no stomach for vinegar," and I flung down a gold piece as I sat me at a table not far from the door, but being careful not to remove my hat.

At sight of the gold the man's face brightened and his manner became more respectful as he bustled out to get the wine.

"It is the best vintage, Monsieur," he mumbled as he appeared with the bottle. "It comes from the cellars of the Abbé de Rochfort himself, and as you know, Monsieur, the Church has ever the best of taste!"

I laughed assent, and as mine host, with great caution, poured out a glass of his precious wine I bade him bring another and drink to the health of

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the king.

Nothing loth the fellow obeyed with alacrity, and as I hoped, no sooner did the rich wine warm his thin blood than his tongue unloosed.

"It is not often we have distinguished visitors like Monsieur!" he declared, his eyes rolling with delight as he held up his glass to the sunlight, so as the better to gloat over the ruby brightness of the contents, whilst his lips smacked together as if at the recollection of the last draught. "Ah, no! these are gay times for Brêle indeed!"

"Is it so?" I asked carelessly, refilling his glass, "have you then other visitors?"

He nodded his head communicatively. "Ten men-at-arms," he said with some importance, "of the following of a great Seigneur. They are waiting here for Madame, who fell ill on the journey but who is being nursed by the good sisters at the convent," and he jerked his thumb backwards in the direction of the hill.

"Ah," I said, slowly twirling my glass, "if that be so, and they make no long stay perhaps they will let me ride with them if their road is mine, for the times are rough and single horsemen do not always reach their destination."

But at this suggestion mine host shook his head.

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"Monsieur would do well not to propose it," he said. "The men are rough fellows—and—" he broke off awkwardly, and stood gazing into his glass as if at a loss to proceed.

"*Eh bien*," I replied easily. "'Twas but a passing thought, I have no wish to ride with a party of croque-morts if such they be; besides their time and way might not be mine."

"They ride northwards at break of dawn," said mine host. But what he would have added I know not, for at that moment the door was flung open and the Guisards trooped noisily in.

I drew back a little into the shadow and they passed without heeding me. There were nine of them, and to my joy I observed that mine ancient foe was missing. Evidently something was wrong, for the men grouped themselves, together talking loudly, whilst I listened, thrilling with excitement, for lo, without an effort, or the raising of a finger I was learning all I was most anxious to know.

It appeared that a messenger had arrived hot-foot from Monsieur le Comte, (as they called him) bidding Briconnet, the captain of the little company, bring Mademoiselle on with all possible speed and secrecy, the reason being, so the message ran, that

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Monsieur le Comte had heard that I had escaped the vigilance of the men left behind at Mauban to catch me and he feared an ambush which might rob him of his prize.

The men were evidently grumbling at the decision of their leader to start that very night, whatever Mademoiselle's condition; he having gone to acquaint the Mother Abbess of his intention to call for her as soon as ever the moon was up, for they feared to miss the road without some guiding light.

"Le petit Balafre," as they nicknamed their captain,—evidently in mocking imitation of the well-known sobriquet of M. de Guise,—was in no good odour with his men just then, and they heaped abuse indiscriminately on him, Monsieur le Comte, and Mademoiselle.

It was in the midst of these objurgations that they caught sight of me and for a moment there was a hush as they eyed me with no little favour. In fact, so ugly were their looks that I felt the safest plan was the boldest, and affecting a manner of bonhomie I was far from feeling, I rallied them good humoredly.

"Come, messieurs!" I cried. "From what I gather you are being far from well treated, but cursing is thirsty work and will go easier after a cup of wine!

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Landlord!" I called, turning to mine host with a generous air, "wine for these gentlemen, at my expense!" and I flung down another gold piece and beckoned the men to be seated.

Diable ! the scowls soon disappeared as they obeyed with alacrity, and not many minutes had passed before I was sitting cheek by jowl over the wine with the men whose swords would have been at my heart had they had but a suspicion who I was. My blood warmed over the adventure, and my heart was light to have learned so easily all I wanted to know; but I was not done with the fellows yet, and as the wine flowed, I skilfully drew the conversation round to the ruined monastery on the hill, asking the landlord the same questions de Buissac had put the day before.

Parbleu ! I could have laughed for joy as I saw the men's faces of horror as they listened to the harrowing tale of the ghostly Abbé Lefère, and many of them crossed themselves in terror as the landlord, whose head was somewhat heated by the good d'Arbois, drew still further on his imagination, and related most truly blood-curdling tales of the grisly spectres who haunted the ruins on the hill. Even the wine remained untasted as they listened, but at length, thinking they had had

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enough, I struck in.

"Nay, nay, mine host!" I laughed, "we shall ne'er dare seek our beds to-night if you tell so fearful a tale, and—" I added slowly, looking from one face to another as I spoke, "from what these good fellows say, they are bound for a ride past this self-same haunted abode this very eve!"

Ah! you should have seen their looks! I made de Buissac laugh over it afterwards, when I related my tale. Blank horror, consternation and fear, mingled together on their white faces as they crossed themselves again and again.

But my work was done now, and I was not minded to linger in so dangerous a neighbourhood, so, bidding all a courteous adieu and a pleasant journey, I took my leave—and but just in time—for as I rested my hand on my bridle rein, I saw, advancing towards the inn, Monsieur Briconnet himself, and I recognized in him the self-same murdering croque-mort whom we had left for dead in the oak woods of Lescar, two years ago.

He stared hard at me as he passed, and although the two years had bronzed and lengthened my face, I saw a glimmer of recognition in his eyes, whilst he halted as if to speak.

But I was too quick for him, and was in the

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saddle and trotting down the street at a good round pace before he could make up his mind where he had seen me before.

You may be sure I was well pleased, when, after some skilful manoeuvring, I managed to get back to the monastery in safety, without being seen by so much as a stray rabbit, and found Mademoiselle de Montelart, and de Buissac in a fever to know all I had accomplished. I made them laugh over the tale of the men's supernatural fears, and then, with no little pride, I laid before them my plan.

"Mademoiselle leaves the convent to-night," I said, "as soon as the moon is up, and she is to be escorted with all speed to Monsieur's Château de Labaille,—so, what we do it behoves us to do quickly, and as we are three to ten, and our enemies armed with arquebuses besides swords we must e'en have recourse to strategy. Now my plan is this, that you, Mademoiselle, remain here, mounted if you will, but safe behind the shelter of the wall, whilst Pierre and I, also mounted, hide behind the ivy which covers two openings in the wall leading to the road. This road our enemies must traverse on their return with Mademoiselle, for it is not likely that they would take the cut across the fields, which we discovered, leading to

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the high road.

"Very well—as they pass they will see by the light of the moon, which is now but feeble and wavering, a tall figure in a monk's white habit and cowl, standing before them in the road. You may guess what will follow. Though they would face twenty foes in the flesh, they will lose all courage and presence of mind at the first glimpse of the dread Abbé Lefère, and, if any stand the shock, Pierre and I will be there in readiness to deal with them; but seeing that they will have Mademoiselle amongst them, I would have as little bloodshed as possible."

"And Abbé Lefère?" said de Buissac slowly, as the light dawned on him.

"Will be Henri in the habit of Mademoiselle Denise," I added.

"It is a most excellent plan," said my friend warmly, grasping my hand. "Nay, it is superb;" and he laughed softly as he pictured to himself the scene. Mademoiselle de Montelart too looked up with eager approval.

"It seemed so impossible to us," she said ingenuously, "we thought, and thought, Monsieur de Buissac and I, but we could not think how she might be saved—but now—ah, Monsieur!" and she

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smiled divinely, "is it not true that love will ever find a way?"

I think she spoke truth.

CHAPTER XIII

OUR ENEMIES ARE SCATTERED

We persuaded Mademoiselle Denise to rest for the remainder of that long day, and when in acquiescence to our entreaties she had lain down on the couch we made for her, under the old rose bower—for she shuddered at the thought of re-entering the monastery—de Buissac and I, lantern in hand, sought once more the chamber where we had found her, intending to rebuild the wall which we had pulled down, for, as de Buissac said, “it were better that she should be dead for ever in the eyes of her enemies.”

It was a long and tedious task and when we had finished it we made a close inspection of this room of tragedies to discover, if possible, the living tomb of the good Sœur Angélique, but no sound came to guide us to where she lay, doubtless by this time, wrapt in the sleep that knows no waking, and with heavy hearts and minds filled with curses against

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the fiends who could practice such foul murder in the name of Holy Religion, we sought the outer air, leaving behind us in God's good keeping the bodies of those who had doubtless suffered there for His sake.

Then, when once more the shadows grew long on the distant hills, Henri appeared, bringing Mademoiselle Denise's horse, and clothing, besides the provisions of which we stood in such need.

My excitement was growing intense as the time approached, but I forced myself to eat, pressing Mademoiselle de Montelart to do so also, for we could not guess when we should have another meal, and then, whilst she retired to don the clothes Henri had brought, we three sat together discussing over again each point of the intended ambushade, for I well knew if we failed now there could be little hope of rescuing Gabrielle again.

Presently Mademoiselle de Montelart rejoined us, looking lovelier than ever in her blue cloth riding attire, but no more having the appearance of a serving maid, than Etienne's little sweetheart Marie, had that of a grand lady.

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Darkness fell at last, and I judged it time to make our preparations, for we had heard the sound of horses' hoofs and men's laughter some time before, and I guessed it to be Briconnet's band, on their way to the nunnery. Mademoiselle we left in the garden, bidding her remain there till we came for her. She made no demur, but stood looking after us with wistful eyes, her hand on her horse's bridle, and Henri's horse also beside her. De Buissac turned to wave her farewell, for the moon was now slowly rising, and we could see her slim form outlined against the light, and I could not help thinking how sorry would be her plight did aught befall us.

But we should not fail, of that I felt sure, and I will always maintain that confidence is the begetter of success. We stationed Henri in the shadow where the road took a sudden curve, and then brought our own horses to a halt within ten feet of each other where the wall had broken down, the gaps being filled, however, with overhanging ivy, through which we could see without being seen.

How my heart beat as we stood there, knowing that a single neigh from our animals would bring swift destruction to our hopes,—hopes on which

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more than life and death depended. And the waning moon rose slowly in the east, like some red ball, then gradually growing brighter and brighter as she mounted the star-strewn sky. The time had come. I caught my breath and listened. Yes! faintly on the night breeze was borne to our ears the jingle of spurs and bridles, the pit-pat of horse hoofs on the hard road, the voices of the men;—nearer and nearer, louder and louder the sound came, till through the ivied screen I caught sight of steel corselets, and bending forward with great caution, I saw, with a sudden quick throbbing of my heart, a woman's figure amongst them, mounted on a grey palfrey, and knew my darling was once more near me.

My heart beat now like a sledge-hammer, but my head kept cool, and my fingers closed on my drawn sword, as I swore to myself I would save her, or never more see the light of day. And then—just as the horsemen came abreast of me, there rose from the foremost a quick gasp of horror, and there—in the dim moonlight came gliding from the ivied wall—as it appeared—a shadowy figure in the white habit of a Cistercian monk, his cowl drawn close over his face, his arms raised, whilst his hands

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moved to and fro as if he were wringing them piteously towards an implacable Heaven, whilst a moan, so eerie, so wild, so truly awful in its sound that even my own nerves thrilled, broke from his lips.

A moment the horsemen, paralyzed with terror, stood, reining back their frightened steeds, then with a yell, which brought forth an innumerable company of owls and bats from the ivy, they broke and fled, some leaping the hedge in their mad fright, others turning tail and flying towards the copse on the right hand side of the meadows, one or two even dashing past the weird white figure of the apparition, and with terrified shouts galloping down the hill towards the village, with spurs deep in their horses' sides. One and all, I doubt not never stopping, or so much as looking behind, till they reached the door of the "Grey Boar," there to astonish the sleepy ears of mine host with blood-curdling tales of their adventure, and to calm their fears in the wine cup.

Never was rout so complete, never ambuscade more successful, for of our ten foes, one only—Briconnet himself, stood his ground, swearing lustily, you may be sure, as he seized the bridle of Mademoiselle's palfrey and tried to urge it back.

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wards in the direction of the nunnery. But he reckoned without his host; before he was aware of our presence we were upon him, and so hampered was he, what with his own restive steed and Mademoiselle's, that he had not even the opportunity of drawing his sword before his arms were pinioned in de Buissac's strong grasp and my sword was pointed threateningly at his breast. He recognized me now, and in spite of his position cursed loudly at me and his own folly for being so tricked, but a handkerchief across his mouth effectually stopped his blasphemy, and as Henri now came up, I ordered him to help de Buissac carry the fellow away and bind him securely whilst I remained to reassure Mademoiselle, who had scarce yet realized what had happened and sat staring at the scene in startled amaze. But as I bent forward on my saddle towards her she gave a glad little cry of recognition and the next moment I was off my horse and beside her.

Oh the joy of that moment! it can only be described as contrasted with the agony of suspense I had been enduring since I heard of her fate. And now, ah! now my blood thrilled in my veins as I stood looking up into her sweet eyes and seeing the love light shine through the sorrow in them. Ah!

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my poor Gabrielle, the happy gaiety of her girlhood was gone under the heavy blow which had befallen her, the laughing child's face was now a woman's, and a moment before had been a white, sad woman's, with deep shadows under the eyes which had been made for mirth, but as we stood there with clasped hands the colour was ebbing slowly back into her pale cheeks, whilst she bent forward to softly whisper my name, "Godfrey—Godfrey—oh, thank God—thank God."

I would have taken her in my arms if I had had my way and comforted her, pouring into her ear the thousand things I had to say—but I knew that although the first danger was past our position was still critical,—there must be no delay. It was now close on the stroke of midnight, and with the early dawn the recreant soldiery might and probably would return in search of their captain, so tethering my horse to the wall and leading Mademoiselle's by the bridle, I once more re-entered the monastery garden.

"Quick, de Buissac!" I shouted, "we must not lose time over that lumber," for I saw he was still bending over Briconnet who writhed and rolled on the ground in his rage, whilst Henri knotted the cords about his legs.

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"Now carry him to the cloisters and leave him there," I said curtly, for the man's language was not fit for ladies' ears, as he swore to be revenged on us all ere long; but this cursing gave place to howls of terror as we departed, leaving him to the company of the owls and bats and the fear of the dreaded Abbé Lefère. I warrant he was nigh dead with terror before his men found him the next day, and I have since had reason to wish that it had been not only well nigh but altogether. Nay! could I have seen into the future as the astrologers claim power to do, I should have had small compunction in running the villain through as he lay there cursing and howling in the cloisters.

But the future was hidden from mine eyes, and the present had suddenly become so sweet that I had been well content to live in it for ever.

I think Gabrielle was surprised to find another lady in our company, but this was no time for explanations and from their first introduction the two women seemed to be taken with a strong affection for each other, though that was no matter for surprise, as none could see Gabrielle without loving her, and Mademoiselle Denise was a sweet lady, as de Buissac evidently found, since he had eyes for none other.

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And so we rode south, I and Gabrielle leading the way and Henri bringing up the rear.

I cannot tell you all we said to each other, for it was spoken only for our own ears, and might indeed appear foolishness to you, as lovers' speeches have a way of doing to those not immediately concerned. But presently Gabrielle reined in her horse with a little exclamation of such grief, that I bent forward in some fear that she was ill.

"Oh, Godfrey!" she cried, and there were tears in her voice though I could not see her eyes in the dim light. "Oh, Godfrey, how shall I tell you?" And she caught her breath in a little sob.

"Nay, *ma mie*," I said reassuringly. "Do not distress yourself, for now I have you safe, nothing can give me pain," but even as I spoke, I thought of the crescent, and I confess I listened in some fear for her words.

"Oh, Godfrey," she sobbed, "it was not my fault. I had it safe, so safe, in the bosom of my dress, I liked to feel it there, and know I kept that which you prized before all else. I was so proud of the charge—and then—and then—when *he* caught hold of me saying he would carry me away to be his wife and I thought I should never see you again, I grew

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mad and struggled, oh, how I struggled to be free of his arms, but he was too strong, and in the struggle the case fell to the ground—and the crescent—your beautiful crescent—” her voice quivered and shook with emotion. “He—that devil—saw it and seized it before I could stop him—and he laughed—how he laughed—and said it was my dowry, and a dowry for which his father would have sold his soul.

“I implored, I entreated him to give it me, saying it was not mine but yours, but he only laughed and swore that in a few hours you would want for nothing but a few feet of cold earth, or a stout rope to a neighbouring tree.” And at the remembrance Gabrielle broke down completely, so that I had much ado to comfort her, saying that there was only one thing I prized on earth and that I had it, seeing she was once more beside me, and for the rest it was no fault of hers, though I swore I would have blood for every tear Gaston de Lincourt had drawn from her bright eyes.

But my heart was heavy within me as I rode on, for the crescent my father had so solemnly placed in my keeping was ever a talisman in my eyes, and I told myself that I had been a fool to let the precious jewel out of my hands, for in do-

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ing so dangers and difficulties had arisen around me.

Pah! I can laugh at such superstitious follies now, for I know that man's fate lies in the hands of God, not in the possession of a lifeless jewel. But I was young then, and foolish too. So I swore that I would pursue my foe to the uttermost parts of the earth to regain my treasure so soon as I had placed Gabrielle in safety.

I had planned to ride to Tarbes for I knew that Monsieur and Madame de St. Armande would gladly give a shelter to both our fair charges, till such time as I at least had reclaimed mine inheritance and could wed my love. And I doubted not that ere long Mademoiselle de Montelart would become Madame de Buissac, for it was plain that the good Pierre was hopelessly enthralled by her lovely face and gentle ways, whilst she too looked with a great kindness on her deliverer, which was natural seeing that but for him she would now be languishing in a terrible death.

So, as we rode on we planned and talked of many things, of past memories with tender regret, and future hopes with glad happiness, till the grey dawn crept into the sky, and the birds around woke the sleepy earth with their early matins of praise.

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And as the light deepening in the east showed us each other's faces, I saw in Gabrielle's eyes such a weariness that I determined that, come what might, we would rest at the next village we reached.

CHAPTER XIV

I FALL INTO THE HANDS OF GASTON DE LINCOURT

So we rode south, resting at village inns, and often times picnicking by the wayside, or beside running streams in some shady wood. And in spite of dangers and alarms we were happy, happy as only the young can be, when love is whispering his old, old tale into their ears, and eyes can seek only one other face and find an answering happiness therein.

I felt sorry for poor Henri, who having no sweetheart to make merry with, would look somewhat forlornly at us as he sat apart. But lovers are selfish mortals, and his loneliness contrasted pleasantly with our own great joy.

As I have said we had alarms, for few could travel far in those days of faction and friction without meeting contending parties; but for safety's sake, and because our escort was scanty and our charge precious we took of the serpent's wisdom and became as far as possible all things to all men; but

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avoiding encounters when we could do so, and making detours of the towns.

So at last we came again to Nérac, overjoyed to set our horses' feet once more in the territory of Navarre. The king was at Montauban we heard, on a flying visit with Monsieur de Mornay, though for the most part the court remained at Nérac, and as I learnt M. de Rosny was still at the château I went thither to report myself and beg further leave of absence, for my mind was still set on the pursuit of the villain Gaston.

He received me with the grave kindness which ever characterized him and listened to my tale with much attention, raising his brows from time to time especially as I told of the rescue of Mademoiselle de Montelart, but he made little comment, only saying he would acquaint the king with my intentions, though as I prepared to depart he thawed into a more genial friendliness than was common to him.

"Take care of yourself, *mon ami*," he said kindly as he grasped my hand. "Remember a snake is more difficult to deal with than a lion, and is dangerous even in death. And the King of Navarre can ill spare a brave soldier in these times." And he sighed, for he had ever his master's interests deeply at heart, and I knew he was much disturbed

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at the way the King of France's minions were bribing many of the Huguenots over to the changing of their religion by soft words and offers of advancement.

But politics just then were not much in my thoughts, as I went back to the inn where I had left my party, and so, on once more we sped, with slacker rein now and less vigilance as we passed through the friendly country of smiling vineyards and shady woods, beauty and laughter around and above us.

As I had foreseen the good old Sieur and his wife welcomed us all with open arms, Dame Isabeau's motherly heart going out at once to the two fair young girls whose sad stories filled her kindly eyes with tears, and her heart with love.

Oh, those were happy days! I look back on them now as I sit old and grey, with pen in hand gazing out of my window, and picture once more those sunny scenes where Gabrielle and I dreamed our sweet dreams of love together under the old apple trees in the château orchard, where the ripe fruit hung down in rosy clusters and the slow river rippled by at our feet, adding its soft monotonous chant to the songs of the birds amongst the trees which stood bowing to the breeze in their glorious

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autumn robes of every tint from pale gold to olive green.

Ah! in the dreary days to come when life and hope seemed gone for ever, the thought of those sweet hours came to help me with their whispers of joy and gladness.

But though I lingered dreaming thus, my purpose was still strong within me and so, one day, when the smiles had come once more to Gabrielle's lips, and the rosy hue of health to the pale cheeks of Denise de Montelart, I stood to say farewell to my darling, with my hand on my horse's bridle and my arm clasping her waist.

There were tears in her hazel eyes, though she tried to laugh through them to send me happily on my way. And this time no foreboding of the future came to warn me, as I kissed her sweet lips and told her I should soon be back to claim my bride, and that then the crescent of Lincourt should fasten her bridal veil.

She smiled and blushed at my words, but the next moment her lips quivered piteously as I turned to mount my horse, but she struggled with her emotion, and as I waved my farewell she smiled bravely, whilst I, as my horse bore me from her sight, could not help comparing the slim figure framed in the

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old doorway of the château, with that little one, which nine years ago had stood just so, with sad eyes, smiling lips and wind-tossed hair to give me a last good-bye on my ill-fated journey.

It was a cold, raw day on which I set out this time in search of Gaston de Lincourt, a heavy mist had settled down on the distant hills, and already a fine rain was falling.

With the exception of Henri I rode alone, for de Buissac had gone to Agen some time previously to acquaint his parents with the news of his forthcoming marriage with Mademoiselle de Montelart, and to make all due preparations for the same. And for once I did not regret his absence, for my present errand was one which I must settle with mine enemy alone.

Still, it was dreary work riding alone through the long roads, heavy with mud, and the cheerless prospect of leafless trees and empty fields around, so at last I called Henri to my side for the sake of company and the purpose of laying before him my plans.

I intended to ride first to Lincourt, little doubting that the good Etienne would be well acquainted with Monsieur Gaston's movements. I could then follow him, and when I had found him, send Henri

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with my message, a message which no man with the pretensions of a gentleman could refuse. And there and then, sword to sword, and face to face, he should render me an account of the wrongs he had done me, and my face grew grim at the thoughts of that long reckoning.

If he would not fight? Well then, there was nothing for it but to seek the proffered aid of the King of Navarre, and take by force what was mine by right.

But I put this last thought from my mind, for villain though Gaston was, he was at least brave, I thought, and he would not, *could* not refuse an honourable challenge lest friends and foes alike cried coward upon him.

And so as we rode I planned my plans and smiled grimly as I thought of that hour when my sword point would be at his breast: till in good time we came once more to the familiar woods of my boyhood.

"We must now proceed with caution," I said to Henri, for I was no hot-headed boy to run my head into the lion's jaws without ascertaining both his whereabouts, and his temper; so we fastened our horses to a tree at some distance from the château and proceeded on foot.

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If it had been dreary on the road, it was drearier by far here in the leafless woods, with the wind whistling through the bare branches of the trees overhead, and all around us the dank smell of damp earth and dead leaves and bracken. I wrapped my cloak closely about me, for the day was still more chilly than when we had left Tarbes, whilst Henri beside me rubbed his hands together and blew upon them to get back the warmth to his cold fingers.

For some time we wandered, seeing no soul, but at last, when my patience and temper were well nigh exhausted, we came upon Jean La Roche, brother to him whom Louis de Lincourt had racked, chopping wood in a small clearing.

I had no difficulty in recognising his dark bullet head and twinkling black eyes, but he did not know me, nor was it likely he should, seeing I was but a little lad when he had seen me last, and one he had long thought dead, so his black eyes grew round with wonder when I addressed him by name.

Poor fellow! when he understood at length who I was he would have knelt down on the wet earth to kiss my hands, had not I prevented him.

"Nay, Jean!" I said kindly, for I was touched at the big fellow's emotion, "but I would crave a service of you. Bid Etienne the falconer meet me

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here as speedily as he can." I knew it was no good to question the fellow himself for he had ever been scarce better than a natural, though kind-hearted and devoted as a faithful dog.

I had to repeat my request before he fully took it in, and then leaving his axe against the tree stump, he trotted off and I could hear him chuckling with glee as he ran.

It was dull work waiting there, listening to the drip, drip of the moisture through the trees, or the dismal croaking of the ravens in the branches above us.

But presently we heard the sound of returning footsteps, and Etienne stood before us, panting and breathless,—he had flung himself on his knees before me and was kissing my hand in sheer delight at the seeing of me, before I was well aware that he had come, whilst he poured forth a torrent of voluble patois, so that I could scarce follow him.

It appeared that his complicity in our escape had not transpired, whilst Marie, too, with skilful subterfuges had parried the suspicions which had alighted on her head and had so escaped punishment.

That we had been successful in our enterprise Etienne gathered from the fact that Monsieur

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Gaston had returned a fortnight after our departure, in a towering rage, so that none dared approach him.

"But you are in danger, Monsieur le Comte!" said Etienne in much excitement. "That poor fool Jean gave me your message, but I misdoubt me the villain Captain Briconnet heard it for all his seeming indifference, and they have long watched for you—Briconnet in special seeming to have a grudge against you, and he is wily as the serpent who tempted Mother Eve; you had best beware, Monsieur, for I fear——" But Etienne's fears were destined never to be heard, for at that moment our ears caught the sound of horses' hoofs approaching at a quick gallop.

Etienne's face grew white to the lips. "I have been tracked!" he gasped. "Oh, Monsieur, believe me!" the poor fellow's face was piteous—I grasped his hand.

"Nay," I said. "I could fear no treachery from the son of Antoine Lebrun, but look to yourself, my friend, it is each for himself now unless I am mistaken."

"If we could but reach old Nanon's hut," muttered Henri, and I saw for once the danger had overcome his fears of the supernatural. I nodded.

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"Quick," I whispered and down the nearest glade we dashed at full speed, whilst the sound of the horses' hoofs grew louder behind us. Suddenly I heard Henri utter a sharp exclamation and stop, but I was running at too great a speed to check myself, and, before I was aware of my danger, had nearly charged full upon two horsemen who had evidently been guarding the entrance of the glade.

The game was lost; I knew it even as I laid my hand upon my sword, for I was panting for loss of breath and Etienne was in no better state; of Henri there was no sign, and I, supposing the sudden bend in the road hid him from view, paid small heed to his disappearance. In fact I was too hard pressed at that moment to pay heed to aught but the steel-clad men-at-arms who bore down on me, pike in hand. I fought like a rat in a trap that time, feeling death grinning at me from every side, and so fierce was my sword play that in spite of his advantages I had the fellow through the body in two minutes; but it availed me naught, for I had scarce drawn forth the bloody blade than I heard another shout behind and four more horsemen with "*le petit Balafré*" at their head galloped up. Even then, with my back against a tree I would have fought till I died, for Briconnet's face was aflame with the lust of joyful

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revenge. But when he called on me to yield I thought of Gabrielle, and the hope of future escape made me do that which in the days to come I cursed myself for doing.

I was bound, hand and foot, as if I were a criminal, though I protested fiercely and strove violently with the men who held me whilst Briconnet sat in his saddle laughing like the fiend he was.

"It's my turn now, Monsieur Fire-eater!" he sneered as I was placed on the saddle before a trooper, bound and helpless as a babe. "And I shall be no laggard in paying the debts I owe you,"—and he swore, doubtless at the remembrance of Abbé Lefère and the way I had outwitted him.

"Was there not a third?" he questioned sharply as the men hauled the poor falconer on to another horse. "I swear there were three men who ran from us!"

But the man-at-arms whose fellow I had killed shook his head.

"Only two have I seen, *mon capitaine*," he said, "if there had been three they might have escaped. St. Marie! but they were devils of fellows!" and he rubbed his arm ruefully, for Etienne had made a

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fight for it, all unarmed as he was.

Briconnet frowned. "I would have been sworn there were three," he muttered, glancing round.

"A rabbit could not hide here without being seen," observed one of the men. And after some further hesitation Briconnet gave the order to return.

There was no escape for us this time, and I heard Etienne groaning as we were jolted along hanging as limply from the saddle bows as a pair of trussed fowls, but I gave no sign of my discomfort for my heart burned with fury within me, and I cursed myself for a blind idiot in thus having walked open-eyed into the toils of my foe.

It would be no question of a challenge now; I was at the mercy of a man who had not foreborne to strike down an old grey-haired man in the sight of his daughter, and at the thought of Gabrielle and her grief at my non-return my heart sank heavily. Ah me! my talisman had cost me dear.

And so—after many long years I entered the great stone gates of my old home and my rightful inheritance. Oh, the shame of it! How I repented me of not dying sword in hand, facing the odds in the woods yonder, as I stood at last, bound and bruised, before Gaston de Lincourt. Yes! we were

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face to face at last, but how differently from my imagination. I could not but shiver as I looked again into the thin, narrow face, with its cruel lips and crafty eyes so like those I had seen set in death not long ago in the great gallery above us.

A mocking smile played on Gaston's face as I stood thus before him between two troopers, whilst Briconnet stood by, telling his tale with many curses and vile oaths, and the smile grew more sinister still, the cruel eyes narrowed down more obliquely when the story ended.

For a time there was silence, the dread silence which precedes the doom of a man, and Gaston, like some great cat at play with a mouse, sat toying a paper he held in his hand and eyeing me with the same mocking smile.

I did not quail, no! not even then, though I knew the end of our quarrel had come and he was victor, but stood giving him look for look till perforce he had to drop his gaze.

Then of a sudden he leant forward and thrust the paper he played with before my eyes. "Do you know, Monsieur, what that is?" he queried, with a cold, little laugh, as I stared at it with eyes that, as they read, grew large with horror in spite of my efforts.

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Know what it was! Ah! better the thrust of a sword, the quick death of a soldier, better the headsman's block, aye! better almost the felon's rope than the living death, the prolonged agony of the dreaded Châtelet. And thither that piece of paper would carry me.

Know what it was! Ah, there needed little knowing to recognise the instrument more dreaded throughout France than any other method of revenge—the *lettre de cachet* of the king.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE CHÂTELET

I scarcely heard the sentence pronounced on Etienne. I scarcely understood what was being said around me.

I heard Gaston de Lincourt's cold little laugh again and again, then Briconnet seized my shoulder whilst one of the men cut the bonds which bound my legs.

"Come, *mon ami* !" laughed Briconnet's evil voice in my ears, "you shall ride to Paris if you promise to behave yourself, but beware how you try to hood-wink *me*, clever one !" and he struck my cheek as he spoke with a bitter taunt.

I walked to the door as a man in a dream, but ere I passed out I turned once more towards Gaston de Lincourt, who sat before the fire which blazed in the great hall, his legs thrust out as if enjoying the warmth, and his head thrown back with the air of a man in perfect content, his mocking eyes watching me with lazy triumph.

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"We shall meet again, Gaston de Lincourt," I said slowly, whereat he laughed heartily.

"In purgatory perhaps," he said with perfect nonchalance. "Meantime I wish you a pleasant journey, and safe arrival at your château, Monsieur le Comte, as we most certainly shall *not* meet again in this very charming world. I crave your felicitations on my approaching marriage with Mademoiselle de Mauban. Morbleu! I shall know how to trim the little cat's talons, I warrant you!" And he laughed afresh at the rage which burned in my face.

But of what use were words? I was helpless, utterly helpless! Even Henri, I thought bitterly, had forsaken me, and life was narrowing down to a cell in the most terrible prison of France; and as I thought of what that life would be, I felt my heart grow cold and heavy as lead as Bricconnet pushed me before him towards the door.

That journey to Paris! even now I shudder as I think of it, for the man whose life had twice been in my power spared neither taunt, gibe nor insult in his pitiful vengeance.

I prayed for death, as I was often to pray for it through the months to come, but instead the life-blood ran the more strongly through my veins, for death is as fickle a jade as fortune and will have

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naught to do with those who beseech for her to come to them.

But the bitterest times of life have the one consolation—they are not eternal—and in time we came once more to Paris, once more we clattered through the Porte St. Michel **and** along the narrow, evil-smelling streets. Oh! the weariness and the pain of it all! and the awful memories which leapt to quick life as I recalled the last time I had ridden through those streets beside Marie d'Estelles, and listened to the death cries which rose from every side.

This time, however, it was mine own bitter death-cry of hope which rang heavenwards, as I looked for the last time—as I thought—on the blue skies above, and breathed the fresh air through my lungs. For before us now lay the Châtelet itself, with its grim, mysterious turrets which spoke silently to every passer-by of tragedies and horrors undreamt of by the heedless, hustling crowds who thronged the streets or crossed the bridge towards the Cité.

How many an innocent victim had languished within those twin fortresses, how many had passed with head erect or cowering in terror, from their dungeon to the Place de Grève! Should I ere long make that journey, or had there been written across

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that fatal order those dread words, "*Pour être oubliée ?*"

Some of the horror must have been written across my white face, for Briconnet laughed aloud in his triumph, as he bade me farewell at the great gate.

"I have given you into safe hands, Monsieur," he said jeeringly, "and prepared a warm reception for you. I now go south to bring the fair bride to Lincourt. It is a thousand pities you will not be present at the marriage feast, but you shall not be forgotten, I promise you. No! we will all drink long life and prosperity to you in your present abode. It is indeed a rich inheritance, a charming château, ha, ha!"

And the villain rode off laughing, whilst I, dumb with rage and despair, heard the great door clang behind me, and knew my doom was sealed.

The next few hours passed in a dream. I was not taken to the Salle de la Question, for there was naught they wished to know to be drawn from me. So I was merely brought before the governor, that M. Nautouillet whose name is well known in the annals of the Châtelet, and there searched, my sword and my money being taken from me, the governor remarking with a grim smile that ten louis was the entrance fee of so distinguished a visitor as

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myself. Then sick at heart, and faint with exhaustion, I was taken and thrust into a cell, and the heavy bolts turned upon me.

For a time I remained where I had fallen, too utterly miserable to take notice of aught around me, but presently I raised my throbbing head and gazed about my prison. It was a cell, so tiny that there was hardly room to move, still less to contain furniture, naught indeed save a pile of evil-smelling and verminous straw in one corner. The atmosphere was stifling, the only ventilation being a slit two inches wide above the door, through which a faint light filtered from the passage without. And yet there was one thing for which I felt a thrill of gratitude—I was at least alone; and for that I thanked God in spite of my great misery, since it was a boon indeed in the crowded Châtelet.

And so the heavy doors of my prison closed upon me, and I knew that they would never again open unless to take me on my last journey to the Place de Grève. In the long weeks that crawled so slowly by, I came to pray that this fate might speedily be mine, for what charms had life for me? I was as surely shut out from all that made existence sweet as *Sœur Angélique* in her little niche in the ruined monastery of Brêlé; nay indeed! I could have envied

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her, for *her* agony was short and mine was long—so long !

I should have gone raving mad, if it had not been for two things—my thoughts of Gabrielle and the dim unquenchable hope that one day, in some inexplicable fashion, I should live to clasp her in my arms again. And secondly, by reason of the surly friendliness of my jailor.

A repulsive-looking villain he was, with cross-eyes, stubbly beard, and blotched, besotted face ; but as in the case of some others, the fellow was not as black as he was painted, and, except when he was mad with drink, he would treat me kindly, and even on rare occasions try to cheer me after the fashion of Job's comforters, with the details of some of the worse horrors of the Châtelet till my blood ran cold as I heard of the terrible dungeon of "*la fosse*," where the unfortunate prisoner had to be let down in a bucket to a space so confined, that he had to sit with his feet in the noisome water, feeling the reptiles crawling and wriggling over him, yet unable to stand or lie, till death, which scarcely ever delayed his advent beyond ten days, came to set him free, or, again, the dreaded "*fin d'aise*," a dungeon alive with reptiles and every uncleanness, and so poisonous an atmosphere as to speedily quench the life spark of

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its unhappy occupant.*

To all these horrors I listened in a dull apathy, almost amused at the fellow's gloating delight over the terrible details; though I shuddered when I thought of how near I was to the tortures he described, and wondered dimly whether death would come to me in these weird and awful shapes.

And the days became weeks, and the weeks crawled slowly by into months, till I lost all count of time, and ceased to know or care whether it were winter or summer, spring or autumn outside in the great world, for of what account were the seasons to me now? Never again should I see the hedgerows and the brown fields bursting into new life at the touch of the spring breezes, never again should I feel the kisses of the summer sun, never again ride blithely through autumn woods with the music of the chase before me. No! from henceforth, time for me was to be marked only by the two visits of the turnkey with my meals, or the lying down to dream the broken, distorted dreams of a despairing mind, and the rising again to the long, maddening day.

If I were to recount to you all that passed through my mind during that awful time you would

*See Dalaure's "*Histoire de Paris*."

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think it was a madman whose writings you read ; and yet I did not go mad, I did not die, to the surprise, I think, of the turnkey and the governor, who paid me an occasional visit. No ! I lived and clung to the life which had become only a terrible mockery of existence.

Sometimes my moods were bitter indeed with despair, and I would sit, huddled up on my straw, cursing fate, and tracing gloomily all the misfortunes of my life, without so much as a thought for all the mercies I should have been thankful for ; then again my mood changed and I became a prey to religious doubts and fears, which racked me into an agony of remorse, and I would lie with my face buried on my arms praying wild, unreasoning prayers to the God Who, I told myself, was punishing me for my sins, whilst the face of Louis de Lincourt as I had seen it last, with the teeth drawn back over his vicious lips, and glazing, hate-filled eyes, would thrust itself like some mocking spirit between me and the words I strove to form in prayer ; whilst my father's voice would echo over and over again in my ears, " Vengeance is Mine. Vengeance is Mine," though I would cry aloud—as if in answer—that I had taken his life in no spirit of revenge but merely in self-defence.

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But my brain was weak with the horror of my situation, so that the thoughts of my sins and this one before all, fastened on me like fell spirits who would fain claw their victim to death or goad him to despair. And no voice came to me to whisper, "Peace, be still."

Then I would fall again to thinking of Gabrielle, now lingering with tender yearning on the few happy days which had illuminated my whole life with glorious sunshine, and then again starting in dumb frenzy to my feet, as I thought of the fiend Gaston's last words and the taunt of Briconnet.

His wife! His wife! Bah! did I not know Gabrielle better than that? She would kill herself first, I knew full well, and death was a little thing, such a little thing, and I grew to wondering how long it would be before the grim King laid his hand on me, and whether *she* would come to fetch me from my prison cell. It could not be long, ah! I could not endure the thought else! I could not, *could* not linger here long years, and yet—the life blood ran strongly as ever through my veins. I felt no weakness. I was young and stronger than my fellows; maybe I should live many years, on and on, always the same, sleeping, eating, thinking—an existence on the rack of memory, and death the

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only liberator.

I thought I had come to the lowest possible pitch of suffering, and yet one day when so many months had dragged past, that as I said I lost all count of time, I heard news that seemed to fill my cup to the overflow of misery.

It was the governor himself who brought it, as he stood looking down on me one day in his tour of inspection. I think I aggravated him because I would not die, though Heaven knows he might there and then have terminated my career, and none been the wiser. But this course he did not choose to adopt, though his words brought the chill of death near enough to my heart.

"Turnkeys who talk have no place in the Châtelet," he observed abruptly, as after one contemptuous glance round he prepared to leave me. "From henceforth remember, Monsieur, that this is the house of silence; though even should you forget,"—and he laughed,—"you will find that a mute is poor company to detain from his work," and with that he left me.

So one of the two links which bound my reason had snapped. I was to hear no more the sound of a human voice, and I shuddered as I pictured the grinning, voiceless being who was to be henceforth

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my only visitor. Ah me! It was little consolation enough poor Jacques had given me, and yet I grew almost loving, as I thought of his rough, ugly face, and the clumsy efforts of his best moods to cheer me.

I averted my eyes as the key grated in the lock, and did not look round till I heard it close again behind my new keeper.

But next time my meal was brought, curiosity got the better of my aversion, and as I peered through the gloom, my heart gave a great leap, and my head swam dizzily, for in the brief look before the turnkey closed the door again our eyes had met and I had recognized Henri Dubois,—mine old servant.

Men die of joy, they say. Well! if so, I must have been near death that night. I was delirious with excitement,—sleep I had none.

Over and over again I conned and wondered how this thing had come to pass, whilst I hugged myself again and again in a wild ecstasy as I thought with a thrill that deliverance was at hand.

And yet, how was it to be compassed? Plan after plan passed through my head, but no way could my dazed brain discover. No! I must leave all to Henri, my brave, faithful Henri. Ah! what

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remorse I felt for the hard thoughts I had had of him. His escape must have been miraculous, and yet how far more wonderful, that the dumb turn-key—the man whom, unseen, I had loathed and hated—should be he!

Well! I could think no more. I must be passive, passive! Bah! how impossible, when my heart was like to burst with its mighty throbbings. I was unnerved with the sudden hope which had suddenly flooded the inky blackness of my soul.

By the morning however I was calmer. I understood how great need I should have of a clear head and quick wits. But I will confess that the disappointment was bitter when my next meal was brought with no sign, no word from my new jailer only one brief look of warning, then he was gone.

And so the days passed by. Neither by word nor sound did Henri address me, or show that he was more than the mute whose rôle he played. But one day, ah! what a day! instead of merely placing my food within the door and retiring, he made a quick step forward, thrust a paper in my hands, and with a warning gesture, was gone.

For some time I stood staring down at the precious slip in dumb excitement. My knees shook under me, my head whirled. At last I unfolded it,

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and creeping close to the door and straining my eyes to catch the glimmer of light which filtered in, I read :

“ You are condemned to die by the axe in the Place de Grève to-morrow. To-night when the governor visits you, beg, implore for a priest, say you repent you of your heresies. The request will be granted. Instead of water the pitcher contains a scarf : hide behind the door, and stop the priest's mouth before he screams, the rest is planned.—HENRI.

“ Eat this for safety's sake.”

Over and over again I spelt out the precious words, the words which told of death, and yet brought life. Yes, life and hope, and my blood thrilled at the thought as I glanced round my narrow cell.

Ah ! you who read can never guess what my feelings were at that moment. It was a supreme one in my life, and the joy which filled my heart nigh overwhelmed and unmanned me. The thought of Cabôche and his bloody axe scarce concerned me. That Henri would be successful in his plot seemed to me assured. I had no fear, only my heart beat wildly as thought after thought crowded in upon me.

My meditations, however, were cut short by the sound of approaching feet. Quick as thought my billet was swallowed, and the contents of my pitcher

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concealed under the straw on which I was lying, when the door opened to admit the governor.

He glanced at me with more interest than he usually showed, though his tone was cold and callous enough as he informed me of my fate.

"Your cell is wanted," he observed in the casual tone of one who remarks on the weather. "And so, at the instance of M. de Guise, you will suffer at break of day on the Place de Grève."

I buried my face in the straw with seeming emotion, then, as if struck by a sudden thought I raised myself.

"A priest, Monsieur! for the love of heaven, a priest!" I cried, and I warrant my entreaty sounded earnest enough, for my whole heart was in it, though not for the reason he supposed.

I saw him hesitate in some surprise.

"But I understood you were a Huguenot, Monsieur?" he objected.

I wrung my hands as if in despair.

"Ah, cursed heresy!" I cried. "How I repent me of such sin. A priest, Monsieur! I beseech you, for the love of the saints, a priest!"

"Well, I will see to it," he said, hesitating no more. And he went out muttering something of the pains of purgatory being better than the flames

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of hell; whilst I sat, the beads of perspiration on my brow, hugging myself with joy at my success.

And now came the hardest and longest time of waiting I have ever endured. A time, when the block on the Place de Grève seemed to become more distinct, and the fear of death crept nearer with phantom feet. I held the long silk scarf I had found in my pitcher wound round my right hand. And my heart beat tumultuously once more as at last I heard footsteps—more than one pair this time—approaching.

The keys grated in the lock, the heavy bolts slipped back, the great iron door swung slowly open and the next moment I was upon the man who had entered, holding back his head with all my might with a clutch on his windpipe, whilst I wound the silken scarf deftly enough round his throat.

There was no sound from Monsieur le Prêtre. I warrant you the holy man had been totally unprepared for so warm a reception from the repentant heretic who was to die at the break of day.

Only one gasp escaped him and that was all. Then Henri had come to my assistance and between us we laid the struggling priest upon the straw and in less time than it takes me to tell it we had his clothes off him and mine on him, whilst I, robing

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myself in his habit and cowl spoke a few words of exhortation to his prostrate figure, then, whilst he writhed in helpless fury, there on the straw, I passed swiftly out with Henri beside me, and the great door clanged to on a fresh, and most unwilling prisoner.

With throbbing heart I followed my guide down the long passages, one after another, in and out we went, silently as mutes, and—thank God—meeting no soul on our way. At last we came to the outer door, and here the warder detained us a moment, wondering doubtless why the dumb turnkey should accompany the priest, but I silenced his questions with a show of pious rebuke, saying the man carried back a message of great importance for Monsieur the governor—though my fears lest the governor himself should appear were almost insupportable.

But now we were across the drawbridge—now in the street, now running across the bridge at our utmost speed, silent still, and panting till at last in a quiet corner of the Rue d'Averon we came upon a horseman standing under the shadow of an archway with two led horses by the bridle.

The next moment we were in the saddle and galloping with all speed to the Porte St. Marcel which was at the point of closing. We got through,

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however, just in time whilst in the dusk the costume of Henri escaped the remark it might otherwise have called forth, and we were soon leaving Paris as far and as fast behind us as horses' hoofs could take us.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ESCAPE

It was not till the sky was beginning to be streaked with the first tinge of daylight that we drew rein at last on the confines of a small wood, through which a stream brawled merrily. And it was not till then that I became fully aware that the cloaked figure on my right was de Buissac.

You may imagine the warmth of my embrace as we dismounted, and tethered our horses to neighbouring trees, and the gratitude with which I well nigh overwhelmed both my preservers. Henri, good faithful fellow, broke down and sobbed wildly as I grasped his hand and told him how I could never repay him for his devotion, whilst I saw both look pityingly at me and gathered that my captivity had changed me sadly.

But we said little just then till we had got our clothes off and I had enjoyed the luxury of a bath ; after I had washed and donned the suit of clothes

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that Pierre had brought for me, I felt vastly more like the Godfrey of old, though the stubble was still thick on my chin and my hair hung down over my eyes and upon my shoulders.

Then, after the breakfast of which we stood in good need, they told me, bit by bit, all that had happened during the many months I had been shut up in my noisome cell. At first I could not believe that spring was putting on her green robes for the second time since I had seen the light of day, and stood in vague surprise when de Buissac told me that fifteen months had gone since that dull November day when I had bidden farewell to Gabrielle.

And what of her? That had been the question my lips strove in vain to ask all through that long night ride. Was she—was she?—De Buissac answered the unspoken question in my eyes.

She is still at Tarbes—safe and well, he told me gently, though in truth she had been sick nigh to death when the tale of my capture and fate had reached her from Henri. And so bit by bit I heard all; of Henri's escape from capture by hiding, buried in a thick clump of evergreen where he lay for hours, watching but unseen, till darkness fell, when

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he had crept out and approached the château, and there, by the merest chance fallen in with poor Jean La Roche, who, in an agony of grief at being the unwitting cause of the capture, poured forth the whole tale into Henri's horrified ears, even to how Etienne the falconer had been condemned to the gallows but had mysteriously disappeared from his prison, some said by compact with the Evil One, and others through the contrivance of Marie Touchet, his little sweetheart, who had been distraught at the news of his condemnation, and who had also disappeared with her lover.

Henri heard all, and then, after finding our horses, had ridden hot-spur back to the Château St. Armande where his news brought grief and dismay on all, and had stricken down Gabrielle nigh to death, but for the tender comforting and nursing of Dame Isabeau and Denise de Montelart.

It appeared that Henri, unable to remain to mourn my fate without an effort to save me, had planned his plot for my deliverance with de Buissac, and had come to Paris twelve months ago and entered the service of the governor of the Châtelet as a dumb warder. And at last when he had nearly given up hopes of finding me amongst the prisoners, Jacques' too loquacious tongue had brought about

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his dismissal and Henri had taken his place. He had speedily acquainted de Buissac, who was in Paris at the time, with his discovery, and they had laid their most successful plans.

All this I heard with ever increasing love and gratitude to the faithful friends God had raised up for me in the darkest hour of despair.

And then, as we sat there in the spring sunshine which brought tears of weakness to my dimmed eyes, I told my tale, and de Buissac swore mighty oaths of revenge, and Henri muttered curses on Gaston de Lincourt as I spoke, whilst both gazed at me with a great pity and wonder in their eyes, which made me smile.

De Buissac shook his head when I had finished. Why, after his threats, Gaston had failed to make any efforts for the abduction of Gabrielle we could not understand, the only solution to the mystery must lie either in his fear to penetrate so far into the territory of Navarre, or his fickle fancy had changed, and he had remained content with the vengeance he had wreaked on us both by my imprisonment.

But whatever his motive the fact of Gabrielle's safety remained to comfort me, and I felt my youth and strength ebbing slowly back to my heart

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as once more I drew in the fresh keen breath of the spring breezes and thought of my darling and the time when I should clasp her once more in my arms. But there was something to be done before that could be, and my lips set hard together as I thought of it. The reckoning between Gaston and me had grown too heavy to let stand by, and I should know no rest till I stood face to face and sword to sword with my enemy.

In vain both de Buissac and Henri urged me against such a course. I was weak they said with long confinement, my nerves were shattered, I needed rest.

But to all I shook my head, I could know no rest till my vengeance was complete; as for my weakness, God would give strength to the righteous cause of the oppressed.

So I argued, and in my argument I stood firm, so that ere long they desisted, for very weariness. But they broke out afresh when I declared I would go alone, both saying that this they would not permit; and so we compromised—I allowing that they should accompany me as far as Mettray (for de Buissac had learnt that Gaston was at his château of Labaille), and *they* promising not to

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hauk me of my revenge should it become possible for me to force a meeting upon the false traitor who had served me so ill.

And then, as the morning sun rose high we remounted and rode on, laughing as we pictured the governor's rage when he found his unexpected prisoner in the little cell under the stairs, and the disappointment of the sightseers at the Place de Grève that morning.

We rested from time to time at wayside inns, and I admit that I was both startled and shocked when I first caught sight of myself in a mirror.

My cheeks had grown hollow and white, my eyes appeared sunken, and my hair, which hung long on my shoulders was streaked with grey, whilst my chin was covered with patches of stubbly beard. It might have been the face of a man past middle life instead of one scarce four and twenty years old. But the barber's knife worked wonders for my appearance, and when I rejoined de Buissac after being shaved and trimmed, I noticed that his face lighted up with pleasure, though I could not understand why there should be a suspicion of tears in his eyes as he wrung my hand, nor was it till long after that he told me that both Henri and he had at first feared for my reason, so

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wild and strange did I seem when I regained my liberty.

But I was young, and, as I have said, stronger than the majority of men, and so, as we journeyed slowly on, for de Buissac refused to go at the speed I should have preferred, I felt strength and health coming back to me by leaps and bounds. My dimmed eyes grew clearer, my stiff limbs regained their lost elasticity, my brain ceased to be haunted with the weird faces and visions that had mouthed and mocked at me from the corners of my prison cell. And each day the desire to meet Gaston de Lincourt grew more fierce within me. But Pierre restrained my impatience and strove to divert my mind, and in truth there were many things I wished to hear, and I listened eagerly to all he told me of those lost months of my life. How Marguerite de Navarre had been banished from the court of her brother, and her husband's anger at her conduct. Of the illness, mental and physical of the ever weak-minded Duc d'Anjou. Of Henri de Valois' fripperies and fancies, his favourites and his penances, of Henri de Navarre's schemes and intrigues, and of the growing power of M. de Guise and the League.

To all of this I listened with a keen interest,

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though I will confess that I was glad when he turned from politics and spoke of the quiet château near Tarbes, and of Gabrielle; there were so many questions I would have asked of her, and he seemed to understand and recount with patience the thousand and one details so welcome to a lover's ear.

Then, with a proud happiness he told me of his marriage to the fair Denise de Montelart last spring, and how two months ago an heir had been born to them, the most wonderful infant ever yet created, you might think to hear him discourse of its perfections, and I felt even more deeply the sense of gratitude as I thought what it must have cost this faithful friend to have left his wife and child for so long to come to my rescue.

Then I would never be tired of hearing Henri's tale over and over again, and admiring the skill and forethought he had shown throughout. Of the long months whilst he had played the dreary rôle of dumb warder in the Châtelet he could not speak without a shudder, and indeed the poor fellow had seen sights and witnessed cruelties which chilled the blood to hear of, and would scarce be accredited did I relate them. Tales of vengeance, greed and extortion, and the awful fates of many innocent

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victims who happened to have only offended or been in the way of some of the great ones in the land, so that my own past miseries shrank and dwindled to nothing beside them, although I will ever aver that a quick death, however appalling, is to be far preferred before the slow agony of prolonged existence in circumstances so terrible, so hopeless as mine, when day by day one felt reason slowly parting from the living body, and the torments of mental suffering finding no alleviation in the silent gloom around.

Ah! what gratitude I felt to these two good friends, and above all to the great God who had guided and given them wisdom in procuring my deliverance.

I had no fear of pursuit for I guessed (and rightly, so I afterwards discovered) that the news of my escape would cost Monsieur de Nautouillet his governorship, and it was an easy matter in the overcrowded cells of the blackest prison of France to find a victim to take my place on the Place de Grève, and none to know that it was not the Raymond de St. Armande of the King's *lettre de cachet* who suffered there at the special request of M. de Guise, whom at this time Henri III. was anxious to conciliate, especially when the

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favour was as cheap as the life of an unknown man.

Well! the time passed quickly enough as we rode on through the spring sunshine, whilst I rejoiced in the songs of birds around me, and gazed with a new interest on the fields tinged already with the faint green beauty of the corn, and the sweet fragrance of the wayside flowers. But I rejoiced still more as we neared, and in due time reached Mettray.

De Buissac and Henri made one last effort to persuade me to let them accompany me on my errand. I laughed at their friendly fears as I grasped my sword in the hand which had grown strong again to meet its foe, but I told them I had learnt too much to risk my liberty again with so foul a coward, and that I should rival the serpent of old in cunning and strategy. And so, still protesting, I left them and my horse at the "L'Oiseau Vert," to await my return, and proceeded on foot with beating heart and a cold rage which would be ill I knew for my foe in the forthcoming encounter, for it spelt death to one of us, and that one I felt assured was not myself.

The Château de Labaille lay not half a league from Mettray itself and as the road was straight

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enough, being the highway to Tours, I had no difficulty in finding it.

But now, how to proceed on my single-handed campaign I knew not! A hundred plans had suggested themselves to me as I argued with de Buissac in the parlour of the L'Oiseau Vert, but here, at the gates of the château de Labaille itself, matters seemed less easy; the first thing was to find out exactly where the château lay, for was invisible from the road, being surrounded by woods.

So proceeding further up the road I vaulted the low, moss-grown wall and creeping along under its shadow was about to plunge into a mass of undergrowth which confronted me when, turning an angle of the wall I came suddenly face to face with a lady sitting upon a bank, her wide hat lying at her feet filled with primroses, whilst she bent with flushed face over something in her lap, something which with a quick movement she hid in the bosom of her dress as with a low exclamation of fear she half rose from her mossy couch at my appearance. As she did so, she raised her eyes to mine and in spite of the eleven long years since we had met recognized, in startled bewilderment, Mademoiselle Marie d'Estelles. She did not recognise me, nor

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would she, seeing I had been a little lad when she had seen me last, and indeed I marvelled somewhat that I should have known her again, for the slim girl had grown to the full and riper beauty of a magnificent womanhood. Yes! she was beautiful,—of that there could be no doubt,—tall, and of a fine figure, with masses of red gold hair, full red lips and dazzling complexion; but the hard look in her blue eyes, which had repelled me as a child, had deepened and intensified with the years, and there was an expression about the corners of her mouth which reminded me of a tigress ready to spring upon her prey. So we stood facing each other for a few minutes and I wondered at her agitation which was apparent under her assumed calm, an agitation which grew almost beyond her control as I slowly pronounced her name.

“Who are you?” she cried passionately, “and wherefore do you come, prying upon me, in this unmannerly fashion? Do you not know these are the grounds of Monsieur le Comte de Lin-court?”

My face grew grim I know at her words, but I was not minded to answer her anger for anger. No! for I remembered her parting words to me eleven years ago and knew that this

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woman was not one to forget—or forgive—and that there was no love in her heart for Gaston de Lincourt.

So I bowed.

“Mademoiselle,” I said gravely, “though I do not know if I am right in so addressing you, I was in Paris on the 24th of August, eleven years ago. But perhaps you have no memory for the little lad you saved from a cruel death that night.”

Her eyes grew wide in astonishment as I spoke, and she bent forward, almost glaring into my face as I concluded my simple speech.

“Raymond de St. Armande!” she gasped. “Saint Marie, is it possible? and now—but now!” and she clasped her hands in much agitation as she stood confronting me, her breast heaving with emotion. “Raymond de St. Armande!” she repeated, as if she tried to pierce some dulness of her brain with the words—“and you have come—?”

“To repay a heavy debt,” I said sternly, and I saw she understood, for her breath came in short catches of excitement.

“I too, am here—for that!” she whispered, bending forward again so that I could feel her hot breath on my cheek, whilst she glanced behind her as if she feared the very trees would hear her secret,

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as she continued rapidly, the words seeming to be hissed in my ears. "Yes! I am here. You remember all? You wonder doubtless why I have not fulfilled my words before? Ha! ha! I wonder at myself when I think of *him* lying dead and cold these many years in Paris, but the time has come at last. I have worked long and patiently, ah! so patiently, but the fates have been against me till now—now!" and she almost choked in her excitement. "Hush, do not speak, but listen. He loves me—*me*—Marie d'Estelles. I have managed it, though I thought it would kill me when he whispered the words in my ear, and I felt his kiss on my cheek,—I—who long only to bury my dagger in his false heart. But I have had patience and smiled on him, so it is arranged—I am to be his bride. Nay! but he has another, and nearer to him than he thinks, one whose kisses are cold, yes, cold as death. But he does not guess it. I am here with my father—we are betrothed formally, and he gloats already as he thinks of the money he shall grasp in his covetous hands. But it will never be his—never. You and I are here to tell him that, are we not, *mon ami*? I am glad you have come, so glad, for dagger thrusts are sometimes struck badly, and the light will be dim, but

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he will not escape you! No! your eye is clear and your blade keen, though my debt is greater than yours."

I felt my blood run cold at her words, for I read madness and murder in the burning flash of her beautiful eyes, but I knew I must tread warily, for I could not fight a woman, and she could have stabbed me with the dagger, which I now knew lay in her bosom, did she dream I would balk her of her purpose.

"Nay, Mademoiselle," I said soothingly, "I would fight this villain fairly, sword to sword, for your sake and mine own, for believe me my debt is heavier than you know, and have no fear that he shall escape the doom to which his sins have condemned him."

She eyed me strangely as I spoke, and laughed a cruel little laugh which turned me cold again to hear, but she did not answer at once, but stood drumming her fingers and humming a little chanson as if nothing concerned her. Presently she raised her eyes to mine and smiled sweetly with the air of one who has given up a plan for the sake of one dear to her.

"Be it so, Monsieur," she said gently, "perhaps you are right and I should be unwomanly not to

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accept this gift from you ; so long as he dies what matter at whose hand ? But we must arrange for you to meet him alone, for he would not fight unless driven to it like a rat in a trap."

"Nay, Mademoiselle," I replied eagerly, "that is the very matter that troubled me. I cannot conceive a pretext for drawing him from his people. I was in despair at the thought when I met you."

She nodded, smiling prettily now, so that I forgot that I had thought her mad, or even cruel a while back.

"I can arrange it perfectly, Monsieur," she said, clasping her hands as her trick was. "Yes, it is simple and easy as possible. Listen, *mon ami*. If you follow this path you will come in time to a tiny bridge which crosses the stream ; beyond this, on the left hand side you will find an harbour ; seek it as the clock from the château strikes the hour of nine to-night and you will find him there. But do not come before, it will be dangerous." Then, with a smile and a finger raised to her lips as if to ensure caution, Mademoiselle picked up her fallen hat and glided away through the trees, leaving me standing by the bank of the stream staring after her and wondering whether this creature so beautiful, yet

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so passionate, so fascinating, yet so cruel, were woman or devil. But above all thanking Providence in having placed my enemy so easily within my grasp.

CHAPTER XVII

“VENGEANCE IS MINE”

It had been past noon when I parted from de Buissac and Henri at the L'Oiseau Vert, and so I decided that as the time was short, I had best wait where I was for the few hours that must elapse ere I set out to seek my fate.

It was cool and restful here by the stream under the shade of the budding trees, for the day was close and oppressive, indeed most unusually so for spring, and from the masses of angry clouds which were gathering in the sky to westwards, I augured a coming storm; nor was I wrong, for, as the sun set slowly towards its rest, the first heavy drops of rain came splashing through the trees into the brook, and the sky grew dark around, whilst the mutterings of thunder rolled with a dull reverberation away in the far distance.

I began to regret that I had not returned to the inn at Mettray, for it looked as if, in spite of my

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shelter, I should soon be drenched to the skin, for the light foliage was little protection from heavy rain, and I knew that to fight in wet and sodden clothes would be a serious disadvantage to me, especially as I was by no means entirely recovered from my weakness.

For some time I considered, and then a happy thought occurred to me. I would seek the harbour of which Mademoiselle d'Estelles had spoken, and remain hidden either within or close by it—for I could not see where possible danger could lie, and it seemed that by remaining where I was, I saw a more certain risk of failure. So with caution but speed, I hastened along the narrow path she had indicated, for the rain was now beginning to fall in torrents, and the booming of the thunder was accompanied by vivid flashes of lightning, which from time to time illumined the darkening woods with a fierce, white light.

I soon began to run, for my clothes were becoming wet in spite of my efforts to keep under shelter, and I was glad indeed to reach the bridge and spy out the friendly shelter of the harbour. I reached it in safety, no sign of any living creature was to be seen, and I gave a sigh of relief as I unclasped my wet cloak and shook my cap free of moisture.

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I was in a small, bare room, containing only a table and rustic seat, though one or two books lay about, and there were some foils in a corner. Still, at first, I could discover no hiding-place till my eye caught sight of an inner partition, and I was soon ensconced behind a sliding panel which screened a tiny recess, so dark, that I could see naught but the dim outline of the wall. I was only just in time, for now the storm broke forth in mighty fury, and the rain beat down in sheets of water around my shelter as I could see from peering out through the panel, for the outer room had no door, and was in fact little better than a shed.

At last, however, the rain ceased, though darkness had now fallen, and I could see nothing except in the intervals when a flash of lightning lit up the outer chamber and the dripping woods beyond.

I must be near the château, I thought, for I could hear the clock toll forth the hours, and half-hours, six, seven, eight—how long and how weary was the time—half past eight—and now my heart beat fast, as the pulses of one who watches and waits ever do. Only half-an-hour more and I should be standing sword to sword with——

But even as I thought, I heard the quick sound of footsteps outside, and the voice of a man who

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hummed a careless tune. Cautiously I peered out, for the moon, which was nearing her full, had crept forth for a few minutes from the darkness of the overshadowing clouds, and by her flickering light I saw before me Gaston de Lincourt, and my heart leapt within me as I recognized his thin, narrow features and cruel, restless eyes peering round as if in search of something or someone.

Then the moon went in again and all was darkness.

I heard Gaston swear softly beneath his breath ; then, as he stood still before the arbour he called softly, " Marie, Marie," and his voice, ever grating and harsh, seemed to soften as he pronounced the name.

But I drew back within my shelter and waited, praying that the fickle moon would come forth once more that I might step out and confront the fellow.

And as I prayed, the light came ; for a moment the clouds parted, and soft, clear and dazzling, the white light shone down—on——gracious Heaven——on *what* ?

I saw it in a flash, ere darkness fell once more, the man standing peering into the arbour, calling softly, " Marie, Marie," and behind him—the moon

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gleaming on her white dress and still whiter face which shone in the light like the face of a beautiful, but malignant fiend,—stood Mademoiselle d'Estelles, her arm upraised and, in her clenched hand, a dagger.

I would have sprung forward, shouting to the man to warn him of his danger, but in the moment, a darkness obscured the moon, whilst, as I stood transfixed with horror, a wild cry rang out,—the cry of a woman in mortal agony and baffled vengeance, and the hoarse, choked oath of a man, both drowned in the crashing roar of a mighty peal of thunder, whilst for one brief second a vivid white light illuminated the harbour and the dripping trees beyond it, and in the momentary glare I saw the two figures standing there in the entrance, sway, then fall, and all was darkness once more. And the awful silence which brooded over a mysterious tragedy.

I stood at the entrance to the inner chamber, and though the chill of night had made me shiver, yet beads of perspiration stood on my brow as I waited there, with my pulses beating tumultuously in head and heart, praying, wildly,—incoherently—for light. And at last, after what seemed an eternity of suspense, the moon crept forth again from the break-

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ing clouds and shone down calm and radiant as ever. The soft beams crept through the tangle of budding foliage overhead, and revealed to my horror-stricken eyes that which lay almost at my feet. And as I looked, the words of solemn warning my father had spoken came ringing back in my ears with the dull reiteration of a chant.

“Vengeance is *Mine*, I will repay, saith the Lord.”

Yes, the revenge of Marie d’Estelles, so carefully planned these many years, the revenge so nursed, so cherished, had been put aside by the Master Hand. And death in another form had called her and her victim to the Judgment Seat of God.

It was easy to see what had happened, as I stood staring down in fearful fascination at the blackened corpses at my feet. The uplifted dagger, on the point of being buried in Gaston’s back had attracted the electric fluid and the same flash of lightning had struck and killed both instantaneously.

There was no mistaking the seal that dread monarch had laid upon them, as they lay there, so close together in death, the same expression of wide-eyed horror stamped on both upturned faces. Gaston must have half turned towards his would-be murderess in the supreme moment, but whether he

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had died before he realized his situation I could not say—though I shuddered involuntarily as I thought of those two sin-stained souls rushed thus violently into eternity. Yes! the vengeance of God had at last overtaken Gaston de Lincourt, and at that moment I was thankful that at least my blade was clean of his blood, for the mad passion had died out of my heart as I stood looking at him there.

The storm seemed to have culminated in that last wild burst, and the moon shone out, soft and brilliant, but I knew I dared not stay here, for who might not have known of this rendezvous, or who might not have heard that cry of agony and rage with which Marie d'Estelles met her fate?

Poor woman, my heart moved with a sudden pity for her as I bent to try and unclasp the fingers which clutched still at the murderous dagger. Her face was beautiful even in death, for though the fire had scorched her terribly, yet the face itself, with its wealth of golden hair remained untouched and gleamed pure and white as it lay resting against the man she had hated with so deadly a hate; whilst the blue eyes stared out past me into the Great Beyond.

Poor woman! the horrors of eleven years ago, when the love of her passionate heart had been

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quenched in blood, had crazed her brain, and blotted out the great and noble qualities of her heart. Let us not judge her, but rather pity one who sinned perhaps not knowing what she did.

I closed her eyes, and then would have stepped out and away through the woods had not something caught my eye—something I had forgotten in the horror of the tragedy I had witnessed, but now I stepped eagerly back and stooped over the body of Gaston de Lincourt; whilst my eyes grew dim for pure joy as I saw, fastening the clasp of his velvet cloak, the sparkling gems of my long lost crescent.

Found! found! I could have shouted in my delight, but I was in the presence of death. And so silently, but with trembling fingers, I unloosened the fastening, and the next minute was speeding away through the woods, my treasure safe in my grasp and my heart leaping gladly with joy.

Death lay behind me in the arbour, but life was before—life and Gabrielle. Surely the clouds of adversity were past at last? I had regained my talisman—I had regained my liberty—I had regained my inheritance. And though I felt a pity for those whom I left behind me, sleeping their last sleep, still I will not pretend that the death of my mortal foe moved me from the great gladness that filled my

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whole heart.

The breezes which stirred the trees overhead brought showers of rain-drops upon me, but what cared I? The sighing of the night breeze only sang songs of hope and love to me as I sped along the narrow path.

At last I reached the highroad, and now I walked more slowly. I must be cautious I knew, for night-hawks are ever on the road, and in those times life was of small account in comparison with a man's gold, though to be sure I looked no fat prize as I stole along, drenched and bedraggled enough—back to Mettray. Great was the joy of de Buissac and the faithful Henri when they heard my tale, the latter openly rejoicing at the fate which had overtaken my cruel enemy; though they spared not their pity for Mademoiselle d'Estelles.

And now there was nothing to be done but to ride south, and this we did the next day. We had no foes to fear now, my personal enemies were gone, though to be sure we had our adventures, and one or two narrow escapes, from parties of the Leaguers who infested and terrorized the country. But we won through, sometimes by strategy, sometimes at the point of the sword, till we reached Agen, where de Buissac parted from me with many expressions of

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heart-felt gratitude on my part, and a promise on his to be present at my wedding when that should be. Then putting spurs to my horse I rode on, how eagerly, how joyfully, knowing every league brought me nearer to my lode-star, and when the Château de St. Armande at last appeared in sight my heart seemed like to burst for very happiness.

The old Sieur and the good Dame Isabeau were the first to welcome me, and a warm welcome it was, for they rejoiced over me as over one who had risen from the dead, and the tears over-brimmed their kind eyes as they embraced me. But they saw my impatience and guessed its cause, so did not stay to question me then.

"She is in the orchard, close to the river," said Monsieur, his face beaming with sly smiles as he watched the colour mounting to my cheeks, but I did not delay to hear more, for I was striding on the instant across the sunny lawns towards the wicket leading to the orchard. And here I lingered a moment, looking across, through the masses of pink and white blooms which laded the trees to where the flutter of a blue gown caught my eyes.

She was leaning against the trunk of a gnarled old tree which half hung over the stream, her head averted from me, so that I could only see the masses

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of her dark hair and the outline of her graceful figure as she stood there, her hat held in one slim hand, whilst the other rested above her head. She might have been the embodiment of some goddess of spring receiving the homage of her satellites.

Softly I approached, my heavy boots making no sound on the thick grass, but within a few feet of her I halted and called her name softly,

“Gabrielle, Gabrielle.”

Swift as a flash of summer lightning she had turned, staring at me half in wonder, half in fear, as one who sees a vision from another world. But when I repeated her name, and stretched out my arms towards her, I saw the sunshine break with April-like brilliance over her tear-stained face, and the next moment she was coming towards me with my name on her lips.

“Godfrey, Godfrey, it is thou ! ”

But of what passed thereafter between us, I leave those who have loved and sorrowed to guess, for there are places in the picture gallery of the past which are sacred ground where we needs must tread with hushed feet, and of which we speak not at all. And one of these deepest, sweetest moments of my life was when after bitter sufferings, Gabrielle and I

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stood once more together in the apple orchard of St. Armande, with the spring sunshine, the flowers and the songs of birds around us, and love in our hearts and eyes. And for myself I can truly say that the joy of those moments more than repaid the sorrow of the past.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONCLUSION

We were married very quietly at Tarbes, Gabrielle and I—only Pierre and Denise de Buissac—not forgetting Monsieur le Bébé, besides Monsieur and Madame de St. Armande being present.

And after the ceremony was over we started for Nérac, for I was anxious to explain all to the king, and also to present to him the most beautiful lady in France.

Oh; how proud I was of her! and with what reason. At times I could scarce realize my fortune in having won the love of so fair and sweet a woman, but when I told her so she would but laugh and tell me I was over-humble, and that she must present me with a new mirror, but I said I wanted no mirror but my wife's eyes, which made her blush and smile as I had wished it to do.

At Nérac we found the court, gayer than ever now, for Marguerite had rejoined her husband,

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although the reconciliation was but a hollow one.

I sought and obtained audience with the king without difficulty, for he had learnt my story in part from de Buissac and was anxious to hear the tale of my escape; but he looked truly surprised when I presented Madame la Comtesse to him, and after glancing slyly from one to the other of us for some minutes, he burst into a hearty fit of laughter.

"*Ventre St. Gris*, man!" he cried, whilst he very cordially extended his royal hand. "Is it not as I said? Never yet was there an adventure without a woman in it. Your pardon, Madame la Comtesse,"—and he turned with gracious courtesy to my wife, "but I congratulate you on having accomplished that which I ever predicted—that a woman alone could bring Monsieur le Comte to know how to smile. Ha, ha! mon St. Michel, dost remember Mademoiselle de Rebours' jest?"

And so hearty was the king's mirth over the recollection that we could not but join in, though Gabrielle looked puzzled, not understanding the allusion.

My wife's beauty made a great stir at court, and no little jealousies amongst the women, especially awakening that of Mademoiselle de Montmorency who was high just then in the king's favour, but I

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father and mother, and if the writing of it be but ill done, remember I set myself up as no scribe, but a simple soldier whose motto has been "For faith and Navarre" since the day he entered the service of France's great king.

And now the shadows grow long in the autumn woods, those woods where Gabrielle, your mother, and I went nutting when we were little maid and lad together. I smile tenderly over the remembrance even now, but the memories of an old man grow tedious, and so I am to close my book and take a ramble once more through the familiar paths; perhaps she will come with me—yes—for the lovelight has never dimmed through the long years in her hazel eyes, and we are sweethearts even yet, though our hair is white and our feet totter towards the grave.

THE END

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